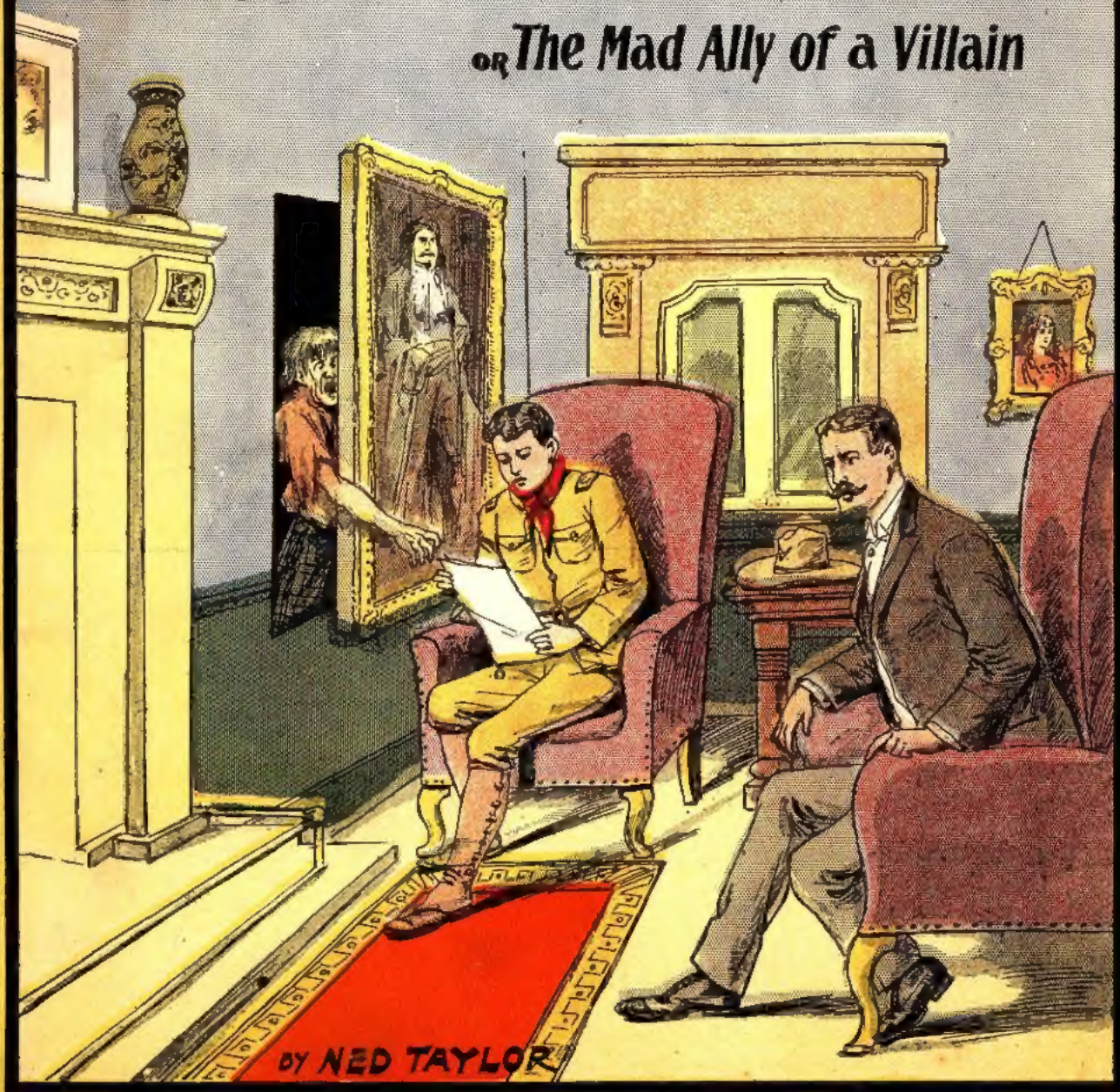
No. 52 5 CENTS

# Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

# THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER'S GREAT PLAY

## OR The Mad Ally of a Villain




While Ted was engrossed in the title deeds, the picture at his side swung outward and a naked, bony arm reached towards the papers.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

*Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1905, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by* STREET & SMITH, *238 William St., N. Y. Application made at the New York Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 52. NEW YORK, April 15, 1905. Price Five Cents.

# The Young Rough Rider's Great Play;

OR,

# THE MAD ALLY OF A VILLAIN.

By NED TAYLOR.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE SAND STORM.

"They ain't no use ter talk; this sartin is ther limit when it comes ter wicked kentry. I been around some, but, gol-durn my skin, if I ever bucked up agin' anythin' ter beat this 'ere."

The speaker was Bud Morgan, one of the members of Ted Strong's famous company of young rough riders.

Bud's remarks referred to the desert country through which Ted Strong was leading some of the members of his band, and Morgan voiced the sentiment of each of his companions.

"I have heard this waste land called 'the country God forgot,'" remarked Ted, "and I am almost ready to believe that the name is an appropriate one, but I am certain we will find portions of this desert which have redeeming qualities."

"Yes," remarked big Ben Tremont, "I have read that the California, or Mojave, Desert, as it is sometimes called, surrounds many tracts of land that are very fertile, but it seems that most of this desert is unlike other sandy tracts that have been redeemed by irrigation."

"Do you mean, Ben, that this land will never be reclaimed in that manner?" asked Bob Martin.

"That's just it," was the answer. "You see, underlying this baked clay and sand there seems to be a solid floor of rock."

A few weeks before this story opens Ted Strong had conceived the idea of taking his young rough riders on a pleasure trip to the Pacific Coast.

His idea was to charter a private car for his party and to take the horses along on the same train.

The plan was carried out, and at last the party found themselves unloading their horses at Silver City, Cal., with the intention of taking a month's pleasure trip on horseback north through the richest country of the Golden State.

The party included, besides Ted Strong, the handsome, dashing young leader of the outfit, Ben Tremont, Bud Morgan, Kit Summers and Bob Martin. Carl Schwartz had intended to accompany the party, but at the last moment had been excused, preferring to spend the time to be devoted to the pleasure trip in visiting an uncle in Kansas City.

Since the organization of the young rough riders, something over a year before, the boys had been almost continually engaged in hard work, and had gone through many startling experiences. Under Ted's leadership they had earned a great reputation throughout the West, and they believed that the pleasure trip upon which they were now launched had been well earned. They had resolved to get all the fun possible out of it.

The morning after they left the cars at Silver City the boys had been sitting on the wide porch of the hotel, after an early breakfast, planning in which direction they would first start, when they noticed a cloud of dust far down the street.

A rider was approaching at a gallop, and as he pulled up in front of the hotel he leaped from his foam-decked cayuse and inquired:

"Gentlemen, can you inform me if a young man known as Ted Strong, the young rough rider, is stopping here?"

"That is my name," answered Ted, rising from his seat.

"Good!" exclaimed the stranger, whom Ted now saw was a young man about his own age, dressed neatly but roughly, after the manner of a cowboy.

"What can I do for you?" asked Ted.

"First I will introduce myself," replied the stranger. "My name is Leo Morrissey, and I, like yourself, am a stranger in this part of the country. In fact, I have not been very long in the West. After I got through college, two years ago, I came West for a knockabout trip, and liked the country so well I have stayed here. I have been working on a ranch, owned by my uncle, up the State, and only came down here a week ago to look over the country."

"You appear to have been doing some pretty hard riding just now," said Ted, advancing to shake hands with the newcomer.

"Well, you bet I have," replied Morrissey. "Fact is, I knew you arrived here yesterday with some of your famous young rough riders, and I was afraid I wouldn't get here before you had departed. I came to inform you of something which I hope will interest you. I want to solicit the services of yourself and companions in running down the most nervy band of criminals that ever infested this part of the country."

"But we are on a pleasure trip," said Ted, with a faint smile, twitching the corners of his mouth.

"I know it, and I'm awfully sorry to ask you to change your course," replied Morrissey, "but I am sure you will come my way when I tell you what has recently occurred."

"Well, anyway, take a seat and let us know the story," replied Ted, and then he introduced the other members of his company of rough riders.

Morrissey lost little time in enlightening the boys regarding the facts that had prompted his sudden visit.

"There has been a band of outlaws known as the Mojave Terrors," he began, "who have been infesting and terrorizing the small towns bordering the desert for a number of months. Parties have pursued them time and again without success in overtaking them. They have a hiding place somewhere near the Nevada line, probably in the rocky hills surrounding Death Valley, or Oasis Valley. Last night the Mojave Terrors made a raid on the town of Gallego, forty miles south of here, killed the cashier of the Miners' Bank, robbed that institution of seventy thousand dollars, kidnaped two young women and got away without a scratch. A posse pursued the outlaws for fifteen miles into the desert and returned without having overtaken them. On the return of the posse at midnight, I saddled my horse and came here to solicit your assistance."

There was a silence for several minutes, and then Ted Strong addressed his companions: "Boys, what do you say? We came out here for a pleasure trip, but it seems that duty is calling us in another direction. Shall we pursue the Mojave Terrors?"

"I reckon we ain't ther fellers ter shirk a responsibility," answered Bud Morgan.

"As my friend Shakespeare would say," remarked Bob Martin, "'When duty whispers we take the cotton out of our ears and listen real loudly.'"

"Yes," said Ben Tremont, "we couldn't enjoy any pleasure trip, knowing that these outlaws held in their possession two innocent girls. I move we put in our time doing up this band of outlaws. We can take the pleasure jaunt later."

"That is the way I feel, too," added Kit Summers.

And so it was soon decided to listen to the appeal of Leo Morrissey. The young rough riders would start in pursuit of the Mojave Terrors.

"Mr. Strong," said Morrissey, "your decision is what I expected it would be, and with you and your brave men on the case I feel sure that the career of the French Devil and his band of outlaws will soon come to an end."

"The French Devil?"

"Yes, for that is what the leader of the Mojave Terrors has been called, his real name being unknown."

Thus we find the young rough riders embarked upon a journey across the waste plains of California known as the California Desert, and a short description of the country over which they were traveling would perhaps not be amiss at this place.

This great desert is barren as a ballroom floor in some sections, blooming like the tropics in others; warmed by the mildest of suns in winter and scorched by an awful heat in summer.

It is kissed one moment by soothing breezes and swept bare of all life by some terrible sirocco a moment later.

Like the land in which they live there are no people on earth more strange than the nomad whites, Piute

Indians and resultant half-breeds that make up its population.

Knit together by a common bond of fear—fear of civilization, fear of the sheriff's warrant, but never fear of man—they "stand by" each other to the detriment of the outsider, who attempts too many liberties with them, or with their customs.

The California Desert is nearly five hundred miles in length, extending from the northernmost tip of Mono County, beyond even the famed lands that lie about Mono Lake, to old Fort Yuma, down on the Colorado River, in San Diego County.

The greatest width is from where the railroad breaks through the San Gabriel Mountains by way of Soledad, straight across the desert to the Kingston range and the Nevada line. The distance is about one hundred and seventy-five miles.

In shape, this great basin, some of which is considerably below the sea level, is a rough leg of mutton.

It was through this desolate region that Ted Strong and his party were traveling in pursuit of the bandits known as the Mojave Terrors.

They were headed directly toward a fertile valley near the northern central part of the desert known as Death Valley, for somewhere in the mountainous hills bordering that valley, Leo Morrissey said it had been proved that the outlaws had a hiding place.

At the time this story opens they were traveling over a sandy plain, bordered on every side by the line of the horizon.

The eye in every direction could behold nothing but sandy wastes.

No hills, no rocky crags, no water could be seen.

The country seemed indeed desolate, and the opening remark of Bud Morgan seemed very appropriate.

But our friends were soon to have excitement enough, and the soon-coming danger was first indexed by a large, black cloud which arose from the horizon to the west.

The cloud at first seemed hardly larger than a man's hand, but it seemed to grow with alarming rapidity, and soon covered the whole of the western sky line.

The next indication of impending danger was a sudden stiffening of the wind, which had heretofore for several hours been blowing like a gentle, cooling zephyr.

Now it grew colder and picked up the loose surface sand and, in seeming play, carried it along the plain for several rods at a time.

Kit Summers was the first one of the party to notice the black cloud and remark upon it.

As Kit called attention to the growing blackness in the west Leo Morrissey looked westward, and then his face grew pale.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "we are in for it. There are no hills or rocks in sight, and it will be terrible if we are caught out in the open."

"What do you mean?" chorused several of the party.

"A sand storm is coming," was the reply.

Only those who have been caught in one of those terrible desert sand storms can realize the danger that now confronted the party of young rough riders.

They were traveling over a vast sand plat, probably thousands of acres in extent, covered with a sand so fine that flour would almost seem like unground wheat beside it.

The wind, that was bearing down upon them from the west, was probably traveling at a uniform rate of seventy or eighty miles an hour, gathering up the fine sand of the desert and pushing it ahead with deadly fury.

As the young rough riders involuntarily stopped when Morrissey spoke they saw that the storm would soon be upon them.

Ted Strong was the first to collect his senses and make an effort toward protection from the terrible catastrophe.

"Off the horses, boys!" he yelled.

As his companions obeyed he then directed that every blanket, tent cloth and saddle be placed upon the ground.

Then by his direction the young rough riders began frantic efforts to erect a sort of wind shield of the blankets and tent canvases.

The horses of the party were placed in a line and the blankets tied to their bodies on the side from which the storm was coming.

Behind this partial barrier the young rough riders snuggled, covering themselves, heads and all, as tightly as possible with what blankets and tent cloths remained.

The horses seemed to realize the dangers as well as their human friends, and with little protest allowed their heads to be covered with the blankets.

The simple preparations had hardly been completed when the storm was upon them.

The terrible wind struck the horses with a force that nearly took the animals off their feet.

It beat its way through the lappings of the heavy blankets and canvases as though nothing but cheese cloth barred its way.

The fine sand sifted in upon the travelers as if through a coarse sieve, and within a second every one of the crouching men was nearly covered with the powdery dust.

It sifted into their hair; their nostrils were filled with it.

The poor horses uttered almost human groans of pain as the sand was driven against their bodies and legs, cutting like a thousand two-edged swords.

Five minutes of such a terrible storm would have been fatal to our heroes, even though they were partially protected.

Just as the boys were beginning to hope that the storm was nearly spent and would soon be past them, a new

danger came upon them, that almost caused their hearts to jump to their mouths.

There came a sound as of a pistol shot, heard clearly above the fury of the wind.

One of the tent canvases had ripped!

The wind tearing through the opening instantly filled the retreat of our friends and their tent bulged out like a filled balloon.

The strings that tied the blankets to the horses began to snap and break!

It would be only a question of a few seconds when the furious gale would carry away their flimsy protection!

## CHAPTER II.

### WATERS OF DEATH.

"B' gosh, that's what I'd call a right smart blow!"

It was Bud Morgan who spoke. The others were busily engaged in digging the fine sand out of their eyes and ears.

The fury of the sand storm had been spent. The wind had blown furiously not longer than three minutes, and it stopped, or went by them, as suddenly as it had come.

Had it lasted a few seconds longer the young rough riders would have been left without the slightest covering above their heads, for the wind had snapped most of the strings that held the blankets in place.

Just as they had thought the blankets were to be carried away the storm had suddenly ceased.

The boys found themselves completely covered by the sand, and it was at least ten minutes before they were able to free themselves and crawl from beneath the blankets that covered them.

Then they discovered that the horses were also nearly covered.

The sand had drifted against them until only their heads were visible from the west side.

The animals were nearly buried and could not move until the sand had been scraped away from their legs.

"As my old college friend, Shakespeare, would remark, 'Who steals my revolvers, steals sand,'" said Bob Martin, gazing mournfully at the weapon in his hand.

The young rough riders found that their weapon barrels and chambers were completely clogged with the fine sand.

As soon as the horses were liberated the men took off every particle of their clothing and shook the sand therefrom, turning their pockets inside out.

Then they turned their attention to getting their weapons again in working order before continuing their march.

"We were extremely lucky to get out of that scrape as easily as we did," remarked Ted Strong, after the journey was again resumed.

"Yes," returned Kit Summers, "but if the storm had lasted two minutes longer it would have been all up with us."

"Still, I wouldn't have missed the experience for quite a lot, now that it is over," returned Ted. "I have often heard of these terrible sand storms, but never experienced one before."

"Waal, I reckon, I don't hanker fer no more experiences like this here one," said Bud Morgan.

"No, we had a great plenty of it," remarked Martin. "Enough is enough and too much is plenty."

"I suppose that is another quotation from your eminent friend, Shakespeare?" asked Ben Tremont.

"That's right," replied Bob.

Although no situation in which the young rough riders found themselves, dangerous or otherwise, failed to inspire Bob Martin with an alleged quotation from Shakespeare, usually comically misconstrued by him, Bob was a great favorite with his companions.

They had long since given up questioning the accuracy of his quotations, and as most of them were so ludicrous the young rough riders were amused rather than annoyed by Bob's chatter.

The young riders traveled along on their way toward Death Valley as they supposed, for several hours, when Ted Strong, glancing at his compass, suddenly halted his horse and gave voice to a note of astonishment.

"What's wrong, pard?" asked Bud Morgan.

"Why, look at the needle in this compass. It seems to have gone crazy," replied Ted.

The young rough riders quickly gathered around their young leader and uttered exclamations of surprise when they saw that the little needle of the instrument moved erratically backward and forward.

"There must be a large deposit of iron ore near by," said Ted, "and it attracts the magnetic needle. I am afraid the compass has deceived us and led us off our proper course."

"That may be a fact," replied Morrissey, "for I was thinking a short time ago that if we had been following the directions given us on starting, we would have long since struck Death Valley, or at least, the bordering ridge of mountains surrounding it."

It should be stated that Death Valley is the name of a large saline marsh, partially bordered by fertile land, lying south and east of the town from which our friends were traveling.

"I had been thinking the same," said Ted, "and that is why I just concluded to refer to the compass."

"Then we are probably lost!" exclaimed Ben Tremont.

"It certainly looks that way," said Ted, "and it is nearly sunset. I planned getting to a fertile camping place by night, where we could find fresh water for our canteens and grass for the horses."

"Well, ain't that a ridge of hills over yonder?" asked

Bud Morgan, pointing toward what they had supposed was the north.

The young rough riders strained their eyes.

Seemingly on the very edge of the horizon, they could see the peaks of what must certainly be the tops of small mountains, extending almost parallel to the direction they had been traveling.

"Yes," said Ted, at last, "those must be the hills surrounding Death Valley, but they are far away, and it will take until late into the night to reach them. Let us start at once and get as far as possible before the sun has set."

The tired horses were turned about and were soon being urged forward toward the promising shelter and food, far in the distance.

As they proceeded, the hills became more distinguishable and before the shades of night settled down over the desert our friends knew that, without mishap, they could reach the mountains by midnight.

It was a company composed of tired men and tired horses that, finally, by the light of a moon, nearly full, entered a wide gulch, leading into the mountain range, which they were sure bordered a partially fertile valley.

The young rough riders had not proceeded far up the gulch when they heard a cheerful cry from their young leader, who was riding several rods in advance of his companions.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Ted. "Here's our camping ground; fresh water and lots of good grass!"

As the others pushed forward they saw Ted dismount and approach a small, slowly moving stream, and bend over it as if to drink from its cooling depths.

But for some reason Ted did not drink. He raised his head quickly and called to the others, who, further down the little stream, were about to lead their thirsty horses to the brook.

"Don't let the animals drink!" was his cry.

"Why, w-w-w-what's ther matter?" asked Bud Morgan.

"Arsenic!" was the young rough rider's short, but startling, answer.

"Arsenic?" was the question that came from several lips at once.

As Ted had leaned over the stream to quench his thirst he noticed that the bank of the brook was slightly coated with a white deposit, but thought nothing of it at first, as he had seen several mountainous streams in the borders of arid plains, the banks of which carried similar deposits.

These deposits were usually soda, borax or magnesia, or combinations of all three.

It was just as his nose touched the water that he became alarmed, for his olfactory organ detected an odor similar to garlick.

Ted had studied chemistry and he knew that arsenic, in a certain mineral form, heated as by a warm sun, will crystallize, and he knew that in that state it gave off just such an odor.

He was therefore convinced that the water of the stream was poisonous.

Before allowing his companions to drink he tasted of the water himself. Taking a mouthful he allowed it to remain in his mouth a few moments before spitting it out.

His test was convincing. There was a sort of a sour, mineral taste to the water and, after it remained in his mouth a moment, he felt the slight burning sensation that proclaimed that his suspicions were true.

The stream was filled with waters in the drops of which death was lurking.

The young rough riders must continue their tiresome journey before going into camp.

The tired horses were again urged forward along the gulch, now very unwillingly, for the animals had seen water and longed to get to it.

The party had proceeded less than a quarter of a mile when they were suddenly surprised by a rifle shot from the rocks above them.

The shot was quickly followed by two others!

The third shot whizzed by dangerously near to Ted's cheek!

---

## CHAPTER III.

### THE OUTLAWS' CAMP LOCATED.

"Into the shadows, boys!"

That was the exclamation of Ted Strong as the shots from above were being fired into his party.

At the same time he dug the spurs into his horse and drove the animal forward into a dark, shadowy spot in the rocks, a few rods ahead.

He was quickly followed by the rest of the party.

They were now evidently out of range and sight of the men above, who had fired upon them, for no more bullets were sent down into the gulch immediately.

But shortly after the third shot, and as the rough riders were reining in their horses, after gaining the shaded spot, from the rocks above them came a piercing cry for help!

It was a young woman's voice!

"Help! Save us from these villains. He——"

The cry was suddenly muffled, as by the placing of a hand over the girl's mouth.

Then all was quiet.

The young rough riders looked into each other's faces, the same thought in each mind.

"The Mojave Terrors!" exclaimed Morrissey.

"And the cry probably came from one of their girl prisoners," concluded Ted.

"Boys," Ted added, "we have come upon the bandits, whom we are after, sooner than I expected. It is our duty now to keep track of them. I am going to find a

way to climb these rocks to the place from which that shot came."

"Alone?" asked Ben Tremont.

"Yes," was the answer, "I think it would be better so. There would be less chance of one being observed than if several went."

Thus saying Ted dismounted from his horse and disappeared in the darkness.

With some difficulty, owing to the darkness, Ted at last found a place where he could ascend the wall of the gulch.

He was obliged to pick his way carefully, and moved slowly and with great caution, so as to make no sound.

He had noted the puff of powder, that betrayed the location of the man who had fired the second shot, and he was making for that spot as nearly as possible.

Ted was a good half hour in climbing the rocks, but, at length, he pulled himself over a jutting crag of rock, and found himself in a little hollow, almost at the top of the ridge.

Cautiously he raised his head, for the moon was shining brightly upon the spot where he lay.

As his eyes came above the level of the rocky basin into which he had crawled he found himself almost within reaching distance of the shadowy form of a man, who was standing almost motionless, rifle in hand, peering over a large rock into the blackness of the gulch below.

Ted was certain that this was one of the outlaws. The man was apparently striving to get a glimpse of the rough riders in the gulch, with the hope of getting another shot at them.

He had not seen our young hero.

Ted could easily have shot the villain dead, but he was certain that other members of the bandit company were lurking near and he wished to ascertain their strength.

His immediate purpose was to free the two young girls if possible.

By shifting his position somewhat, Ted was enabled to look over the ridge, and was surprised to see spreading out below him a great valley.

In the darkness he could not determine whether the valley was fertile or not, but he judged that he was looking down on that great stretch of land surrounding that great saline marsh known as Death Valley. And in this he was correct, as was proved later.

In the valley, and nearly at the foot of the ridge, Ted could see the gleaming fires of a camp.

He was now certain that the outlaws were camped below, and he began to gradually reason out the state of affairs.

The ridge of hills on this side of Death Valley were not wide. The entrance, or at least one entrance to the valley, was through the gulch in which his friends were now concealed.

They had probably already penetrated the mountains nearly to the valley.

From the ridge, upon which he was now resting, Ted saw that in daylight it would be possible to look far out over the desert in the direction from which the young rough riders had come.

He reasoned that the outlaws, having gone into camp on the other side of the ridge, in the valley, they had posted sentinels upon the high ridge. The sentinels had probably noted the approach of the young rough riders, before it became dark, and had waited to shoot at them, when they proceeded up the gulch.

After a long, silent wait, Ted came to the conclusion that his best method of procedure toward capturing the outlaws and rescuing the prisoners was to proceed with his companions up the gulch, enter the valley, return on the other side of the ridge and attack the outlaws in their camp.

But to do this it would be necessary to get rid of the watchful sentinel.

Ted had concluded that the man was alone on the hill. If there had been others, he figured, they had departed to the camp with the girl prisoner, whom they had heard utter the cries for help.

In this latter surmise Ted was partly verified by hearing the sentinel, speaking low to himself, complain:

"Seems like it were most time fer Bill and Jack ter be back. Ther girl must have been a lot of trouble to 'em. Durn bad idea it were ter bring her up here, anyway. Might hev known she wouldn't be able ter tell who ther fellers were we seen comin'. She ain't no fool, an' she wouldn't have told if she knew, I reckon."

Just then Ted's quick ear heard a slight noise, down the side of the gulch, toward the outlaw camp.

Leaning far over he could see the shadowy forms of three men climbing the hill.

The sentinel's friends were returning.

Ted did not wish to shoot the sentinel, as that would only alarm the outlaws, and they might suddenly break up their camp and fly away. He wished to do up the sentinel quietly and get him away.

He wanted the sentinel's companions to search for him. That, he thought, might keep them busy until he could get his men through the gulch and around to the bandits' camp.

But he must move quickly, for the sentinel's outlaw companions were nearly to the top of the ridge.

Just at that moment the moon went under a small cloud and Ted knew that this was his opportunity.

With panther-like quickness and stillness, Ted rose to his feet. Then with a few quick steps, and a mighty spring, he landed upon the lone sentinel's back!

Before the outlaw could recover from his surprise Ted had lifted the man off from his feet!

Ted's iron muscles at that instant stood him good service.

With a mighty effort he raised the man and shoved him clear over the large rock, behind which he was standing.

Then with a push Ted sent the outlaw off the ridge and tumbling down the rocky side of the gulch!

Ted quickly followed the outlaw and, arriving at the foot of the ridge, found that the bandit had fallen almost at the feet of Leo Morrissey's horse.

Ben Tremont had been standing near the spot, and, as the outlaw rolled to the bottom of the ridge, big Ben's hands had grasped him by the shoulders.

The man was considerably shaken up, but no bones had been broken.

As Ben had grabbed him the bandit opened his mouth to yell, but a twist on the neck of his heavy woolen shirt had choked him into silence.

"Hurry up, boys, and hit your saddles!" exclaimed Ted.

It took but an instant to bind the outlaw prisoner and lift him to the horse ridden by Kit Summers.

Kit's was a powerful animal, and could easily carry double.

Ted was anxious to get as far as possible up the gulch before the other three outlaws had gained the top of the ridge, for directly before the young rough riders was a long stretch of the trail made bright by the moon, which shone down between the rocky crags of the ridge.

"Which way is it?" asked Ben Tremont, as he sprang into his saddle.

"On up the gulch," replied Ted, spurring his horse on to the head of the company.

When past the moonlighted strip of the trail Ted reined his horse to a walk and informed his companions of what he had seen from the top of the ridge. Then he told them of his plan to attack the camp of the outlaws.

"Holy snakes!" exclaimed Bud Morgan, "I believe we can surprise 'em and do 'em up."

"Then let's get busy," said Bob Martin. "As Shakespeare says, 'It's madness to defer when bandits are waiting to be transformed into angels, and procrastination is worse than going thirsty.'"

"I don't mind yer quotin' Shakesport all yer a mind ter, but jest cut out that 'ere aggravatin' talk about water," said Bud Morgan. "I reckon I kin drink a whole barrel of ther wet stuff, when I git another shot at it."

"Well, I guess you all understand the plan," put in Ted, "so let us hurry along. I don't think we will have to travel more than four or five miles to reach their camp."

Ted made a miscalculation on the distance, however, for they had gone at least three miles up the gulch before they reached the entrance to the valley, and they would be obliged to travel about the same distance back to reach the outlaw camp.

## CHAPTER IV.

### TED'S PERILOUS VENTURE.

As the young rough riders rode out of the gulch into the wide valley they found themselves in the darkness, for the moon had gone behind thick clouds in the west and would not probably again appear that night, as it had nearly sunk behind the mountain peaks.

Their progress was therefore slow and uncertain, as they turned to follow the opposite side of the ridge, back to where they knew the outlaws' camp was located.

They had probably traveled a mile when Leo Morrissey, who was riding slightly in advance, suddenly uttered a cry of terror.

His horse had suddenly sunk beneath him up to its belly in slimy water and mud!

Leo spurred the animal, with an idea of trying to urge the horse to extricate itself, but the animal was unable to take a step.

Its frantic endeavors to lift its feet only caused the horse to sink deeper in the mire!

In the darkness the other young rough riders could not tell just what sort of a predicament their young friend was in, and their first thoughts were that Leo had struck a bed of quicksand.

"What is the trouble, Morrissey?" sang out Ted's voice.

"I'm in the marsh, I guess," replied Morrissey.

"Are you still sinking?"

"Yes, but slowly," came the answer.

"Catch this lariat," directed Ted.

Guided more by the sound of Morrissey's voice than by sight, Ted loosened his lariat from his saddle and threw it toward the lad.

Three times he was obliged to gather in the rope and throw it before Morrissey managed to get possession of one end of it.

"Now tie it to your saddle and climb back along it to solid ground," was Ted's next direction.

With considerable difficulty Leo obeyed the instructions and, within a few moments, was standing beside his companions.

Morrissey's horse, relieved of his master's weight, now made another effort to lift its feet and finally succeeded in overcoming the suction. Aided by the young rough riders, who united in pulling upon the lariat, the animal finally reached the solid ground.

On investigation it was found that Leo had been riding as close as possible to the rocky ridge, and it was certain that the saline marsh reached clear to the rocks.

There was no way for the rough riders to proceed toward the outlaw camp in the direction they were following.

Yet they were sure there was some way to reach that camp, as it seemed probable that the outlaws had entered

the valley through the same gulch through which our friends had made their way.

Probably there was a way around the other side of the marsh, but to look for it in the darkness was out of the question.

It would necessitate going back along the way they had come, no telling how far, and it was certain they would not be able to reach the vicinity of the bandits' camp before daybreak.

Still Ted Strong was determined, if any way could be found, to get to the assistance of the two girls as quickly as possible.

Approaching the edge of the swamp his ears were attracted by the sound of falling water.

Guided by the sound he followed the side of the rocky wall of the ledge until he found a place where a spring gushed out of the rocks and splashed down to the marsh below.

Placing his palms together in the form of a cup, the young rough rider caught some of the water and carried it to his lips. He found the water strong with minerals, but it was cool and satisfying to the taste.

Ted quickly informed his companions of his discovery and they were not slow about quenching their thirsts and filling their canteens at the spring. Then, several tin pails were procured from the camping utensils, and the tired and thirsty horses were supplied with the refreshing water.

While the horses were being watered Ted was surveying the waters of the marsh as much as possible in the darkness.

At last he made a remark that astonished his friends.

"Boys," he said, "I am going to try and cross that marsh. I know that the bottom is too muddy to wade, but I will try and swim."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Ben Tremont, "don't be too rash, Ted. That marsh may be several miles across."

"It can't be that far," replied Ted, "for that would take it past where the outlaws are camped. My idea is that it is narrow."

"But you will be taking big chances," said Kit Summers.

"I know that well enough," replied the dauntless hero, "but I am resolved if possible to get those two girls out of the clutches of the outlaws."

"But yer mightn't be able ter get ther girls away even if yer got across ther marsh," put in Bud Morgan.

"Well, I'm going to risk it, anyway," said Ted.

"How air yer goin' ter keep yer shootin' irons from gettin' soaked?" asked Morgan.

"I'll tie my revolvers and a couple of rounds of cartridges to the band of my sombrero," was the reply.

All of Ted's companions tried to argue him out of his determination to attempt a swim across the marshy water, but to no purpose. When they saw he was bound to go each urged to be allowed to accompany their young leader, but to each request Ted had an emphatic "No."

He was willing to take the risk in the hope of saving the girls, but he was not willing that any of his friends should accompany him.

Finally Ted was ready to make his attempt. His friends saw him spring into the water and then they saw his form disappear into the darkness, as he swam out into the watery waste!

For some minutes they could hear the splashes made by his hands and feet beating the surface of the water; then all was still. He had passed beyond both sight and sound.

Little did Ted or his companions guess of the experiences in store for him before he should again see the members of his band of young rough riders.

---

## CHAPTER V.

### IN THE BANDITS' CAMP.

As the daring young rough rider, Ted Strong, sprang into the waters of the marsh his idea was to keep in view of the rocky wall of the ledge to his right.

He figured that by thus doing he would be sure to swim in the right direction, and he also decided that the marsh would naturally, at that point, be narrower if anything than further out.

After taking a dozen strokes he tried to touch bottom with his feet, but found that he was in too deep water. Then he continued to swim.

He figured that he must have been a quarter of an hour in the water, when his hands and legs were impeded by a rank growth of marsh grass and weeds.

He again attempted to touch bottom, and was successful, but his foot sank into the miry soil, and he knew it would be dangerous to try to wade.

Ted could now dimly see the faint outlines of the other shore of the marsh, a rod or so ahead.

With great difficulty he made his way slowly through the wet, clinging marsh grass, squirming his way along rather than swimming.

In a few moments he had reached the solid ground and had pulled himself out of the marsh.

He examined his weapons and found them in working order. His clothing was wet, but the night was warm and he was not exceedingly uncomfortable.

Standing erect he found that he was but a short distance from the camp of the bandits. Gleaming through the bushes, with which this side of the marsh was bordered, he could see the lights of the camp fires.

Quickly but carefully, so as to make no noise, Ted parted the bushes and moved on nearer the camp.

The thick bushes permitted him to advance within a few rods of the camp with little danger of being seen.

Then the young man halted and, mounting a small

bowlder to better see over the tops of the bushes, he obtained a good view of the outlaws' temporary camp.

There were no tents and the bandits were sleeping on the ground about the fires, wrapped in their blankets.

It was some time before Ted could locate the prisoners, but he finally made them out, lying in the center of a triangle formed by three camp fires.

The girls were wrapped in blankets, but were lying so close together that Ted was certain they were tied to each other.

On every side of the girls the outlaws were lying upon the ground sleeping soundly.

Then Ted's eyes, in roving about the camp, beheld another individual, whom he saw instantly was also a prisoner in the hands of the bandits.

Near the first fire from where Ted was standing, lying almost in a sitting position, his back braced against a large bowlder, his hands and feet securely bound, was the figure of a handsome young man.

The light from the camp fire shone directly in the face of the young prisoner and Ted could make out almost every line of the young man's face.

The lad, Ted noted, was a decided blond, with light brown hair and a mustache hardly darker than the hair. No blanket covered the form of the young man, and Ted saw that he was neatly dressed in well-fitting and fashionable English clothes.

To rescue the girls, Ted saw, would be a difficult task, as he would have to step over the forms of at least six or seven of the sleeping outlaws to reach the spot where the young women were lying.

Ted also discovered that the outlaws had posted a sentinel in the midst of the camp. The man had been standing behind a large tree, and Ted had not seen him until the bandit had moved forward to replenish one of the fires.

Ted resolved to first make an attempt to rescue the young man. The young rough rider saw that it would be no hard task to gain a position behind the bowlder, against which the young man was reclining, without much danger of being discovered.

He therefore stepped from the rock and made his way circuitously toward that part of the camp where the young man prisoner was sleeping.

He had not quite gained the desired position when he noticed that the young man was waking up.

Stealthily Ted hugged the ground and crawled like a snake from behind the rock toward the side of the prisoner.

The lone sentinel had now moved to the other side of the camp, and was engaged in placing fresh sticks upon the further fire.

To move along the base of the rock toward the young prisoner Ted necessarily came within plain sight of the guard, had the man been looking in that direction. Ted's hope was that he could accomplish his object before the sentinel had finished his work at the fire.

As Ted advanced on hands and knees he carried his hunting knife between his teeth. Nearing the edge of the rock he could just see the young prisoner's feet.

"Don't move or cry out, young man; I am here to rescue you," Ted announced, almost in a whisper. The man had heard his remark, for Ted heard him exclaim under his breath: "Thank God!"

Ted now moved more quickly, and in a moment had reached the front of the rock. With one thrust of his knife he loosened the bonds about the young man's wrists. Another slash with the steel blade and the bonds about the young fellow's ankles fell apart.

Ted dashed back behind the rock, closely followed by the young man whom he had just freed.

They had hardly gotten out of sight of the sentinel when they heard the bandit utter an exclamation of surprise.

The outlaw had discovered that the young man was gone!

The sentinel's cry had not been very loud and had evidently not awakened any of the other sleepers. Peering from behind the big rock Ted saw that the outlaw was making directly for the spot where the prisoner had been reclining against the rocks when released by Ted.

"Keep very quiet," instructed Ted. "If the bandit comes behind the rock we will lay him out and then try to set free the young women."

The guard evidently supposed that the prisoner was still bound, and had crawled a short distance away. The man did not dream, probably, that the young prisoner had been assisted in escaping from his bonds.

The guard paused but a minute by the fire near which the young man had been lying, and then started at once around the rock.

As he reached the corner of the big stone Ted Strong's fist shot out suddenly, and caught the outlaw squarely between the eyes. The man went down in a heap, but was not unconscious.

As the outlaw attempted to rise the young rough rider fell upon him and soon had him under submission. With the assistance of the recent prisoner he soon had the outlaw gagged and bound hand and foot.

It was now not far from daylight. A gray streak was spreading over the eastern sky and Ted knew that he would have to hurry if he was to free the two girls before the bandits began to awaken.

The young rough rider, leaving the young man near the spot where the bandit prisoner was lying, picked his way carefully toward the two young women.

Cautiously he stepped over the prostrate bodies of the sleeping outlaws, and finally succeeded in reaching the place where the girls were lying.

With knife in hand he stooped over to cut the bonds

of the nearest young woman when the girl suddenly opened her eyes.

Ted put up a finger as a warning, but the sudden finding of a stranger bending over her with knife in hand frightened the girl.

With a piercing scream the young woman closed her eyes and dropped her head in a faint.

The girl's shriek had instantly awaked every bandit in the camp!

In a second the young rough rider was surrounded by foes on every side!

As they rushed upon him, too close to use his revolver, his fist shot out, knocking two of the villains off their feet!

But numbers were against him, and in a moment the outlaws had our young hero overpowered!

The young man, whom Ted had freed a few moments before, was soon secured again, and a few moments later Ted found himself securely bound hand and foot, lying upon the very spot a short time before occupied by the light-haired youth.

---

## CHAPTER VI.

### HOME OF THE BANDIT CHIEF.

By the time the outlaws had securely bound their prisoners it was sunrise, and the bandits began preparations for a hasty breakfast.

Shortly after being thrown roughly upon the ground one of the outlaws, whom Ted learned later was the chief of the gang, approached the young rough rider and endeavored to draw him into conversation.

Ted was surprised at the appearance of the bandit chief. The young man had noticed that most of the outlaws were half-breeds. There were one or two Mexicans in the company and a few low-browed, dirty, evil-looking whites.

But the leader belonged to none of these classes. He was far superior to any of his men whom Ted had yet seen.

The bandit chief was strikingly handsome and richly dressed, but his clothes were in good taste with his rough traveling through the mountains.

In lieu of a belt the bandit wore about his waist a wide, blue silk sash, from the folds of which protruded the carved ivory handle of a double-edged bowie knife, and the pearl handles of two delicately constructed but powerful pistols.

He wore a flashy, red silk waistcoat and a blue velvet jacket, flaring at the throat and beautifully embroidered.

His trousers were of some very tough but fine material. They fitted his limbs closely to the knees, and from there down flared out and were split at the sides.

Raven-black curly hair; a black, well-kept mustache; piercing black eyes and a well-shaped nose, were the striking characteristics of the villain's face.

As he approached our young hero there was a pleasant smile upon the bandit's face and his opening sentence was: "I am more than pleased to welcome you to our meager hospitality, but I am sorry that I am obliged to keep you in bonds even for a short time. I would much rather treat with greater respect so famous and brave a guest."

"Then you know me?" asked Ted, in surprise.

"Certainly," was the answer. "You are Ted Strong, the champion rider and lasso king of the West, the leader of the famous band of rough riders, whose wonderful exploits have been commented upon and admired all over this broad country."

"Well, what do you propose to do with me, now that you have me temporarily in your power?" asked Ted.

"You spoke wisely when you said 'temporarily,'" returned the bandit chief, "for, much as I should enjoy a long visit from you, I am certain that your friends will not allow you to stay longer than necessary with me."

"What is your hidden meaning, may I ask?"

"Certainly," was the answer. "Ransom."

"Do you mean to say that you will request my friends to pay for my release?"

"Yes, if you prefer to put it that way."

"May I ask how you came to know my name so readily?" asked Ted.

"I have spies who have watched you ever since you came to this part of the country, and they have kept me informed of your actions. The moment yourself and your men started in pursuit of me, one of my men rode posthaste to inform me. He arrived before you, for he took a shorter trail."

The bandit chief then questioned Ted regarding as to where he had left the other young rough riders, but of course Ted refused to answer the question.

At last the bandit chief, rising, said: "You will have to excuse me now, Mr. Strong, as I must get my men started on the trail home, but do not have the least anxiety concerning your personal safety. You will be well cared for while with me, and I will see that you are inconvenienced as little as possible."

Ted could not graciously refrain from thanking the bandit chief for these assurances, but the young rough rider, nevertheless, did not intend to remain in the power of the outlaws a moment longer than necessary. He made up his mind to grasp the first chance, however slight it might be, to regain his liberty.

But not opportunity to effect an escape came that day. Ted knew that his friends would make every endeavor to get to his assistance, but he wondered how they would get across the marsh with their horses. He knew that they would be considerably delayed in finding a way.

It was not long after sunrise when the outlaws were ready to proceed on their way, and Ted and the young

light-haired prisoner were placed upon the same horse, while the two girls rode another.

As the outlaws stretched out in single file down the valley, owing to the narrow trail between the marsh and the mountain side, Ted found an opportunity to talk with his riding companion.

He ascertained that the young man's name was Frank Fullerton, and that he had been but a few weeks in America.

Briefly, the story that Frank Fullerton told to Ted was as follows:

Eight years before, John Fullerton, a respectable contractor and builder of London, had suddenly disappeared, taking with him a large amount of money from the bank, where he had been saving it for years. No reason had been found for his sudden departure, for his business was thriving and he had no bad debts or liabilities. He had always been a hardworking man and much respected.

Noted detectives had been employed in searching for him, but without success. He had finally been given up as dead, the family unwillingly accepting the verdict of the detectives that the man had been murdered for the large sum of money on his person.

But Frank Fullerton, the son, was loath to believe that his father had been murdered, and the boy had steadily kept up an investigation of the mysterious case up to the present time.

One day Frank met an old friend of his father's who had been in America for a dozen years and had heard nothing of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the contractor.

After a cordial greeting with the lad the friend suddenly remarked: "Well, Frank, how is your father getting along in America?"

"In America?" exclaimed Frank, surprised.

"Why, sure; isn't he over there yet?"

"Good God!" was Frank's reply. "Did you see him in America?"

"Why, yes. Why, what is the matter, lad?"

Then Frank informed the friend of how his father had suddenly disappeared, nearly eight years before, and of the investigations that had been made to learn his whereabouts.

He then assured Frank that he had met his old friend, John Fullerton, not six months previously, on the street in San Francisco, California.

"And was he well? Did he act as if—perhaps——" faltered Frank.

"Why, I did not notice that he acted queer. He seemed to have perfect control of all his faculties. Only when I first addressed him, he placed his hand to his head for a moment as if thinking deeply. I had to tell him my name several times before he seemed to remember me. I was surprised at that incident, but soon forgot it, as he talked perfectly rational from then on."

"And what did he say?" asked the lad, eagerly.

"I cannot remember everything your father said," was the reply, "but I do remember that he mentioned being in the city to record some government title deeds to some valuable mining property he had staked out in some mountainous region in the California desert. Your father also said he had built a regular mediæval stone castle in the mountains, near his mine, and that when all was ready he intended sending for his family."

Ted grew greatly interested in the young man's story, and as Fullerton paused for a moment, Ted said:

"Then I suppose you came at once to the United States to track your father?"

"Yes," was the reply, "I went first to San Francisco and looked up the records. I found that deeds to mining property had been recorded in the name of my father, and I found the location of the property to be not many miles from where we are now located.

"Almost accidentally I stumbled upon a carpenter boss who had been employed, with about forty other men, in building the great house referred to by my father's friend. This man told me many instances of queer actions on the part of my father that leads me to believe that he was out of his mind while the house was being built.

"With the assistance of this boss carpenter I finally secured the services of two men, who had also been employed by father during the building of the big house. These men I engaged to guide me through the desert to my father's property. On the way we were attacked by the outlaws. My companions escaped, but my horse was not swift enough to get away. From what I was forced to disclose of my family connections the leader of the outlaw band, whose name I have ascertained to be Frank Casse, decided to hold me for ransom, something like yourself."

"And have you an idea your friends will buy your liberty?" asked Ted.

"Oh, yes," was the reply; "but it will take some time, as communications will have to be had with my relatives in England. I am mostly worried because of the delay. I cannot drive from my thoughts what may be the condition of my poor father."

Ted deeply sympathized with the young Englishman, and assured the young man he would stand by him through thick and thin, and Fullerton gratefully thanked his new-found friend.

All of this time the outlaws had been moving along as rapidly as possible with their prisoners.

The conversation between the two young men had been held piecemeal, and considerable time had thus elapsed.

It was nearly noon time when the Englishman's story had been told, and the boys found themselves entering a large gulch on the opposite side of the valley from which they had started.

The outlaws had journeyed in a sort of half circle

around the swamp, and had approached the mountainous range on the opposite side of Death Valley.

In all this time there had been seen no signs of horsemen following, but Ted knew that his young rough riders would eventually strike the trail of the outlaws and start in pursuit.

The outlaws, with their prisoners, had proceeded but two or three miles up the gulch into the mountains, when a halt was made beside a running brook.

The horses were allowed to drink, and the men also quenched their thirst, but no signs indicating a stop for dinner were noticeable.

Just before remounting several of the outlaws gathered about the prisoners, and with heavy, colored handkerchiefs blindfolded them.

The girls were treated the same as the two young men.

Then the journey was resumed, but now at a much slower pace.

It seemed to the young men that the trail they were now following zigzagged considerably, and every few moments they were aware that they were climbing some short but steep pathway up the rocks.

For upward of two hours this slow journey continued, but at last the voice of Frank Casse, the outlaw chief, could be heard commanding a halt.

For several moments the two young men sat blindfolded, and then, suddenly, the handkerchiefs were snatched from their eyes.

A wonderful and surprising sight greeted their eyes!

They found themselves in a large hollow among the mountain peaks, tall spires of rocks jutting skyward in every direction.

The open space was probably several acres in extent, and the eyes of the two young men could see no way open for entering or leaving this mountainous retreat.

But the most wonderful sight of all was a large, stone building directly before them.

The house was an immense affair, built entirely of rough stone—such a house as one would never dream of finding in such a secluded spot.

From every corner of the huge building arose antique towers or spires, and the whole resembled more than anything else one of the ancient towers of the Middle Ages.

The boys rubbed their eyes in astonishment, while Casse stood near them, smiling at their surprised looks.

"Young men," he finally said, "allow me to welcome you to my mountain home. I hope to make you comfortable here during the length or shortness of your stay, and I promise to accord you every liberty in my house within the bounds of reason and diplomacy."

Then the lads were unbound and escorted to the house, within the walls of which they were doomed to experience even greater surprises and sensations than had so far fallen to their lots.

The young rough rider and his companion were first ushered into a wide, stone-partitioned hall of the mansion, and from there, a moment later, to a large room to the right, in the front of the castle.

This room, unlike the wide hall, had a very high ceiling and the walls were artistically paneled on every side.

Carved furniture of pleasing and artistic manufacture greeted their eyes, and the room was furnished with a large table, a desk of antique pattern and several chairs.

A single picture decorated the walls—a portrait of a man dressed in Elizabethan costume.

It was a very large picture, ancient in appearance but well preserved, and it occupied a prominent place on the wall at one side of the large room.

Ted at first merely glanced at the picture in taking a general survey of the room, but suddenly looking toward his English friend, he found the young man standing motionless in the middle of the room, as if rooted to the spot.

The young Englishman's face was ghostly white and his eyes were glued to the portrait on the wall!

His lips were parted as if he had been about to make a remark and the words had frozen on his lips.

As Ted looked at the young man, Fullerton's eyes closed; his body swayed to and fro; his knees began to shake.

Ted jumped forward just in time to save the Englishman from a heavy fall to the floor!

Fullerton had fainted dead away!

Just as he was losing complete consciousness Ted heard him mutter, almost inaudibly, two words twice over:

"The picture! The picture!"

---

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE HAUNTED CHAMBERS.

It was some time before Ted was able to restore his new friend to consciousness, and knowing that the portrait upon the wall had in some mysterious manner caused the Englishman to swoon, the young rough rider had thoughtfully removed the unconscious man to the hall before making an effort to arouse him.

As Fullerton at last opened his eyes he gazed vacantly up at Ted and then whispered, almost beseechingly:

"Tell me, was it a dream or a reality?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ted.

"Did you, too, see a portrait on the wall?"

"Yes," replied Ted, "there was a portrait there all right, but why did it affect you so much?"

"You are sure there is no mistake? The portrait is still there?" again inquired the Englishman.

"Yes, I am certain," replied the young rough rider, and then Ted went on to explain the picture as he had seen it.

"The same portrait. Yes, the same portrait," Fullerton muttered over and over for several minutes.

Then the young man seemed to suddenly recover his strength and sat up.

"What a baby I am!" he remarked, with a faint smile at the corners of his still pale lips. "You must think I am indeed lacking in some particular, but let me tell you why that portrait so unnerved me, or rather, why the sudden coming upon it so unexpectedly startled me out of my self-consciousness."

"Yes," encouraged Ted.

"That portrait was painted for a likeness of my great-great-great-grandfather!"

"The de—deuce you say!" was Ted's startled exclamation.

"Yes, that is true," continued Fullerton, "and that portrait, in a different frame, disappeared at the same time that my father disappeared from our home in London!"

"Ah!"

"You can see daylight through this tangled mess?" questioned Fullerton, catching at Ted's almost involuntary exclamation.

"Perhaps," was the answer. "Your father and the picture disappeared at the same time?"

"Yes."

"He probably took it with him?"

"Yes. The picture was his choicest possession."

"Somewhere in these mountains your father is reported to have built a grand, mediæval mansion of stone."

Fullerton nearly fell from his chair as the full import of Ted's reasoning flashed upon him.

"You are right," the young man exclaimed. "My fath——"

The sentence suddenly was interrupted by the appearance of the bandit chief at the door leading off from the hall to rooms further toward the center of the house.

"Will you gentlemen please accompany me?" asked Casse. "Dinner is ready to serve."

As the boys arose to follow the bandit, Ted managed to whisper in his young friend's ear:

"Say nothing of our discovery. Do not mention the portrait. We will manage to see it again and, perhaps through it, sift this matter to the bottom."

"You are right. I will keep mum," was the answer.

Through several rooms richly finished, but not extravagantly furnished, the boys were led by the bandit chief to the large dining room of the castle.

Here they were treated to another surprise, for they found that the spacious dining room was well lighted by electricity, and that dinner was to be served in courses, with a pompous and elegantly liveried colored butler in attendance.

Places for only three had been laid at the table, and Ted instantly wondered what arrangements had been planned by the outlaw for the two young women prisoners.

Perhaps Casse divined Ted's thoughts, for he almost immediately remarked:

"The young ladies are to be served in another part of the house. For your peace of mind, Mr. Strong, I will say that no impertinences will be inflicted upon the two girls while in my house. They are to be treated royally, and will be held under the same conditions as yourself."

"For ransom?"

"Yes, and furthermore, my wife—an excellent woman, let me tell you—will entertain them to the best of her ability while they remain the guests of my household."

After the last course had been disposed of the bandit chief requested the young men to accompany him to another room, which he said he used for a smoking apartment. The Englishman accepted one of the bandit's cigars, and as Casse and Fullerton smoked the outlaw talked.

"Boys," he began, "you are doubtless surprised how such a mansion as this came to be so romantically situated, and how I come to be its owner. You have seen many strange and unlooked-for things since first entering this house, eh?"

"Yes, indeed, and we should gladly like an explanation if you feel disposed to give us one?" replied Ted.

"Well, I can't tell you all the things you may wish to know, but this I will say: I did not build this mansion, nor cause it to be built. How it came to be built I do not know. I found it, furnished much as you see it now. It seemed to have no owner and I took possession. I have done some repairing upon the place, and only a month ago succeeded with great difficulty in installing a complete electrical apparatus for illumining the whole of the ground-floor part of the building. I have found that there is no cellar under the mansion, and that only three of the chambers above the ground floor have ever been finished for occupancy.

"My men," continued Casse, "refuse to go above the ground floor, believing that those three chambers are haunted."

"Haunted?" inquired Ted. "Here may be a real thread of romance."

"Yes, indeed," went on Casse, "and I confess that only in daylight do I, myself, care much about visiting those upper rooms. Not that I am superstitious or believe in ghosts, but often in the night strange noises are heard from above."

"What kind of sounds have been heard?" asked Ted.

"It is hard to describe them. Sometimes we have heard grating noises, as of some one pulling a heavy piece of furniture across an uncarpeted floor. Then again we have heard cries—agonizing human cries!"

"Have you never investigated?"

"Yes, but all has been found quiet and undisturbed, apparently, when I have reached the rooms above. But to continue: Several times—three or four nights in suc-

cession—my wife says she has heard, while I was away, sounds similar to some one with a hard cold coughing painfully."

"Your story, sir, is extremely interesting," announced the young rough rider. "This antique mansion certainly has a mystery worthy of time taken to unravel it."

It was now nearly dusk, and the cigars having been burned to ashes, Casse proposed that he should show the young men where they were to sleep that night.

He conducted his prisoners down a wide side hall and paused before a heavy sheet-iron door. Taking from his pocket a heavy brass key he applied it to the lock and opened the door.

The boys soon found themselves in a large bed chamber, furnished with two large, comfortable-looking beds, a number of chairs and other comforts of a sleeping room. The one large window of the room was securely barred with iron rods.

This was to be their nightly prison cell.

"You must pardon me, boys, for taking the liberty to thus imprison you of nights. During the daytime you are to have the liberty of that part of the mansion you have so far visited, for my men will be surrounding the castle, and it will be impossible for you to leave the house. At night I deem it best to take extra precautions."

The outlaw was about to make another remark. His lips were opened, but no sound came from them.

The three men suddenly straightened up, active and alert, and their eyes sought each others' faces.

They had heard, directly over their heads, a sound as of some one coughing!

A moment later, as they bent their heads in listening attitudes, the sounds were clearly repeated, only this time there were several coughs, as might be made by some one with an aggravated inflammation of the throat!

"The sounds come from the haunted chambers!" exclaimed Casse.

"Where is the stairway?" suddenly asked Ted.

Casse turned and started swiftly up the hall, but, as Ted saw the flight of steps ahead leading upward, he rushed past the outlaw chief.

The young rough rider bounded up the stairs, two steps at a time, but with a noiseless tread acquired from long practice.

He reached the hall along the second floor and started swiftly down the only avenue open to him. Then Ted suddenly paused in front of a closed door.

From the room beyond his ears had again detected the sounds of violent coughing!

With eager haste Ted closed his hands over the knob of the door, and it swung open easily.

Just a second did he pause upon the threshold, and then he sprang forward into the room.

In the dim light he was sure he had seen the shadowy form of a human being passing from the room he had entered into a room beyond!

As he reached the opposite door, through which he had thought a man had just passed, Ted paused as if petrified with amazement.

The young rough rider was not looking into a large room, but a very small one—hardly larger than a closet.

The room was utterly devoid of furniture.

The walls were paneled, but were blank, as far as doors or windows were concerned.

There seemed to be no possible exit through which the shadowy form he had seen could have vanished, yet he could plainly see that the room was absolutely empty!

---

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE.

While the young rough rider was gazing about the vacant closet-like room, into which he thought he had seen the human form enter, the bandit chief and the young Englishman appeared.

"Did you find anything?" asked Casse.

"I found the room to be absolutely empty, as you now see it," replied Ted.

Ted had resolved to say nothing to Casse about the shadowy form he had seen, or its mysterious disappearance.

After the bandit had entered several other chambers on that floor no further investigation was made that night, and a little later the young men were escorted to their sleeping apartment.

As Casse turned the key in the big door, securing the two boys in the spacious bedroom, Ted told the young Englishman what he had seen in the rooms above.

The boys talked over and speculated upon the mystery until late at night.

Once, just before he went to sleep, Ted thought that he again heard sounds of coughing in the room above, but the noise was not repeated.

It was nearly morning when Ted, who had remained awake an hour longer than the Englishman, finally fell asleep.

His sleep was light, however, as in his dreams he saw strange things, shadowy forms, hidden passages, ghost-like processions and hideous faces.

It seemed to him that he had slept less than half an hour when he suddenly awakened and found himself sitting up in bed.

He had a dim recollection of having heard a hacking cought almost at his side!

The room was in darkness, but he felt a strange sensation as if all was not right.

He seemed to feel instinctively that there was a human being in the room besides the young Englishman.

His ears, strained to the utmost, could detect no sound

as of anyone stirring about the room, and his eyes were unable to pierce the darkness.

Thus he waited, every nerve strained to the highest tension, for at least three minutes.

Then there came a sound!

It was as if some one, barefooted, had taken four or five steps across the floor!

Ted sprang from the bed and, as his feet touched the floor, he heard a noise from the opposite side of the room—first a creaking sound and then a slam.

The slam was such a noise as might have been made by wooden shutters being violently closed.

In a moment Ted had scratched a match and had a light.

No person besides Fullerton was in sight.

Ted gazed in every part of the room, but nothing seemed to have been disturbed.

"I am certain a human being, a stranger, was in this room five minutes ago," said Ted to himself.

"Ah!" he exclaimed the next minute.

On a small table near his bedside, Ted discovered a small square of white paper, that had not been there when he went to bed.

He picked it up and found that there was rough scribbling upon it. The writing was done with a lead pencil, and the letters were ill-formed, and the lines were irregular, as if the writing had been done in the darkness or under difficulty of some nature.

Ted hastily read the missive and then awakened the young Englishman, who had been heavily sleeping through all that had taken place in the room.

"What do you want?" asked Fullerton, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

"There is a message here from your father!" was Ted's startling remark.

The young Englishman was wide awake in an instant.

"A message from my father!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Where is it?"

Ted thrust the paper he had found on the stand into the young man's hands.

With a countenance picturing great emotion, and with trembling hands, Fullerton held the sheet before the light and read as follows:

"YOUNG MEN: I do not know you, but I know you are held as prisoners in the mansion. You are held for ransom by the cruel outlaw leader. He may treat you kindly now, for he expects to get a large sum for your release, but I want to warn you that should he be disappointed in that you will never be allowed to leave this place alive. He has held other men besides yourselves for ransoms, and I know of the terrible fate that fell to the lot of some of them at the hands of his followers. This mansion belongs to me. I was driven to hiding to save my life when the place was seized by the outlaws. I am only staying near by, looking for a chance for vengeance. I advise you to fly from here, and I will help you. My name is John Fullerton and I built this mansion. There are secret passages in the structure known only to myself. When you have escaped I want you to bring assistance to drive the bandits from my house. Now I will tell you how to get out of the house through one of the secret passages. In the front room to the right, as you enter the front hall, there is one end of one of the passages. Look behind——"

Here the letter suddenly came to an end!

The writer had evidently been scribbling in the dark. He had unknowingly come to the end of the sheet and had finished his sentence without finding out that the words had not been penciled on the paper.

"What do you suppose your father intended to say in the part of the sentence that is omitted?" asked Ted.

"I have no idea, except that he intended to direct us to look behind something in a certain room, perhaps for the purpose of finding a secret spring or a key."

"The room he designates must be the one in which we saw the large portrait," remarked Ted.

"Yes, that's so."

"Well," continued Ted, "we can do nothing about the matter until morning comes and we are released from this room. At the first opportunity we will make a thorough examination of the walls of that front room, with the hope of finding out what your father evidently thought he had made plain to us in this letter."

Fullerton was silent for a long time. He was thinking over the strange things that had happened in the short time since they had been ushered into the mansion. At last he spoke:

"Mr. Strong, I am glad to find that my father is still alive, but I am certain that he cannot be in his right mind, because if he has seen me he should have recognized me."

"But you must have changed considerably in eight years. How long have you worn a mustache?"

"Not over two years. Your remark is true. I probably have changed a great deal in that time."

"Well, we will sift this matter to the end before we give up. It certainly looks bright for you. I mean the prospect you have of soon meeting your father. My hope is that you will find him either rational or in a condition of mind that may be speedily cured."

As he spoke Ted had thoughtlessly placed his finger upon the head of a nail that had been apparently driven into one of the strips of lumber that composed a part of one of the small panels.

Instantly there was a little clicking sound!

The small panel sunk several inches into the wall and then moved out of sight to the right!

A little cupboard was disclosed to view and, upon one of the three shelves of the secret hole in the wall, were

found a number of papers, neatly folded and tied with a narrow blue ribbon.

Ted reached in his hand and brought the papers toward the light.

As he held them close to the candle he uttered an exclamation:

"They are legal documents! Your father's title deeds!"

Just then the young men heard a key turning in the lock of the door to their room.

Ted had just time to thrust the bundle of papers into an inner pocket and close the panel before the door was opened.

The outlaw chief stood before them with a lighted lamp in his hand.

"Good-morning, young men," he greeted them. "I see you are already up. It is just daylight. We are early risers and I came to inform you that breakfast would soon be ready."

---

## CHAPTER IX.

### TRAILING THE BANDITS.

After the brave young rough rider had left his companions in Death Valley, after announcing his determination to swim across the swamp to the outlaw camp, for the purpose of releasing, if possible, the two young women prisoners, the young rough riders and Leo Morrissey remained at the spot where Ted had left them until daybreak.

As the sun arose in the east they began to be alarmed for the welfare of their young leader.

They could now see across the swamp, and its width was not so great that they feared Ted had met with mishap in crossing it. Their fears were that he had been discovered and had either been killed or captured by the outlaws.

Bud Morgan naturally assumed the leadership of the company in the absence of Ted Strong, and as it became light, he proposed to make a search for a place where they might cross the swamp with the horses.

The search was started and the company started back along the ridge which they had previously followed. They had traveled about a mile and a half when they came to a place, where prints of horses' feet proved that the outlaws or some other large company had ridden directly into the marsh.

"This 'ere must be a place where we kin ford ther swamp," said Bud, dismounting and examining the tracks.

The young rough riders noted the fact that at this place the swamp was considerably narrower than at any other point in view.

After several minutes spent in reconnoitering Bud Morgan gave the word for the party to ride their horses after him into the swamp.

They found that at this place the bottom of the swamp was composed of flat rock. They had little trouble in crossing the watery waste, for at only one place, several rods in width, was it necessary to swim the horses.

Arriving at the other side of the swamp the party lost no time in riding toward the outlaws' camp.

Much time had been consumed, however, and when they at last arrived at the place where Frank Casse and his men had camped they found the place deserted.

While several of the young men prepared a breakfast over the camp fires of the bandits, which had not yet died out, Bud Morgan made a circle of the camp, looking for tracks that would show which direction had been taken by the outlaws.

Bud's trained eyes were not long in striking the trail, for it was a plain one, and as soon as a hasty breakfast had been disposed of and the horses had been refreshed, the pursuit of the bandits was commenced.

"I reckon Ted has been captured," said Ben Tremont, as he rode along beside Bob Martin.

"I only hope he has met with no worse fate than that," replied Morgan. "He may have been killed, but let us hope for the best. As Shakespeare would have said, 'Keep hoping for the best until your hoper busts.'"

"That's the talk," said Kit Summers.

"There air one thing sartin," remarked Bud Morgan, "we ain't goin' ter give up ther search until we find Ted Strong, er know his fate."

The young rough riders had little difficulty in following the plain trail made by the horses of the outlaws until they came to the entrance of the gulch, on the opposite side of the valley. Here, owing to the rocky nature of the soil, the hoof marks were only found occasionally, and the progress was slow.

Night set in before they had traveled far up the gulch, and, as it would be impossible to follow the trail in the darkness, Bud Morgan called a halt and our friends went into camp, resolved to continue their search at daylight.

Sentinels were posted during the night, but nothing of particular moment happened to disturb them, and they were up and eating breakfast at the first streak of dawn.

Slowly they continued up the gulch, pausing often to look for traces left by the bandits, and by noon they came to the place where the bandits had halted the day before to blindfold the prisoners.

Here the young rough riders came to a seeming end of the gulch.

There seemed to be no way for them to proceed further in that direction.

They found themselves in a sort of pocket, and the sides of the gulch seemed to be impossible of ascent for the horses.

While the horsemen were gathered close together, discussing the situation, they suddenly heard a sort of grating noise among the rocks to their left.

Instinctively every eye was directed toward the spot from which the sound had come.

They saw what they had supposed was a large, heavy bowlder slowly swinging outward from the face of the rocky wall of the gulch!

---

## CHAPTER X.

### THE MAD ALLY.

After the early breakfast in the mansion, which Frank Casse, the bandit chief, claimed to belong to him, Ted Strong and the young Englishman were informed that they were at liberty to roam over that part of the mansion to which they had already been introduced as they willed.

As soon as they were alone Ted proposed that they go at once to the large paneled room at the front of the house and commence a search for the hidden spring or movable panel, which they believed John Fullerton had attempted to make them cognizant of in his message during the night.

Frank assented, and the young men soon found themselves in the room, and with little prospect of being disturbed for some time.

As he entered the room, Fullerton advanced at once to the portrait on the wall, and gazed long and wistfully upon it.

At last he seemed satisfied with his observations, and advanced across the room and seated himself in a chair.

"Before we begin our examinations of these walls, suppose you take a look at these legal documents," suggested Ted.

"All right," responded the young Englishman, moving his chair closer to our friend.

"Suppose you unfold them and read them to me aloud," was Fullerton's suggestion.

"All right," said Ted; "I will do so."

Ted had seated himself near the portrait, and now took the papers from his pocket and spread them out, ready for perusal.

"They are indeed title deeds, as I suspected," remarked Ted.

Ted found the writing upon the documents difficult to read offhand, and did not begin reading aloud at once.

While young Fullerton was gazing absently across the room, and while Ted was engrossed in the title deeds, the portrait at his side was swung suddenly outward!

From behind the portrait a long, bony arm reached out toward the legal papers!

Ted, disturbed by the slight noise made by the moving portrait, glanced quickly up and saw the misplaced painting and the bony arm. But that was not all the young rough rider saw.

He saw the face and shoulders of the owner of the arm.

A wild-eyed creature, with sunken cheeks, knotty hair, shaggy and unkempt, thin of neck, was gazing upon our hero!

The creature's clothes were ragged, and his bony shoulders and elbows had worn through the remnant of the shirt he wore.

Frank had instantly sprung to his feet as he heard Ted's low-uttered exclamation, and he, too, now saw the demented creature who was reaching out for the papers.

"Oh, my father!" cried Frank, springing toward the portrait.

As these words were uttered the strange creature turned his gaze upon Frank, looking at him long and fiercely.

"My son?" he questioned, at last.

"Yes, father," replied Frank. "I am your son—your son Frank. Can't you remember me?"

"No, no," replied the insane man; "I had a son—younger than you—a fine lad, but you cannot be him, for he is dead. Dead, dead, dead!"

The last three words were almost shrieked.

Frank had started toward the man with outstretched arms, but he suddenly halted.

"Stand back! You must try no tricks on me!" exclaimed his father.

"Don't cross him, Frank," admonished Ted, in a low voice. "He may recognize you later."

Then, turning again toward Ted Strong, the insane man continued: "I want those papers. They are mine. The outlaw chief must not get them."

"Yes," returned Ted; "we know the papers are yours, and we intended to return them to you as soon as possible, for we did not want the bandits to find them."

This ingenious sentence seemed to modify the madman somewhat. He gazed long and earnestly into Ted's face.

"You are an honest man," he vouchsafed, at last.

"I hope I am; I try to be," responded Ted.

"The bandits are holding you two young men here against your will?" asked the older Fullerton.

"Yes."

"Still you did not heed the warning in the note I left for you last night. You did not look for this secret passage behind the portrait."

Ted explained that a part of the writing of the note had not been placed upon the paper.

"Ah," said John Fullerton, "it was my fault. I wrote the note in the dark. I was afraid you had been unable to read it."

"We will go with you now, if you will allow it," was Ted's suggestion.

The madman paused a few moments, seemingly turning something over in his mind, then he said:

"You may come. Follow me closely, and see that the portrait is replaced in proper position after entering the passage."

In another moment Ted and Frank had followed John Fullerton into the secret passage, but before he began an advance, the crazy man turned to the young rough rider and said: "Before I consent to become your ally, in making an escape from the bandits, you must give me back those title deeds."

Without a word Ted thrust the bundle of paper into the thin, outstretched hand.

The passage that the boys found themselves in, while rather narrow, and not too high directly behind the portrait, very quickly broadened out until they found they could walk along it very comfortably in single file, and stand nearly upright.

It seemed a long and devious course that Frank's insane father led them.

Every few moments they would come to cross passages or to doors leading to passages branching off in various directions.

The insane man made no explanations regarding these, but the boys naturally concluded that these passages led to other rooms in the mansion.

At last, when it seemed to the young men that they had been led nearly around the mansion, they came to a place where the passage widened out into a room about fifteen or eighteen feet square.

In this room was an old mattress, a few pieces of carpet and some old blankets. This was the room where it seemed obvious that John Fullerton had slept.

A second passage led off to the left and to this the old man pointed: "That leads to the kitchen," he said. "I don't go there often, only when my hunger makes it absolutely necessary, and of late I have eaten very little, as the cooks have protected their supplies with locks and keys."

Then their insane ally faced the boys and said: "I am about to show you a secret way out of this mansion, and through the mountain to a gulch, which will take you to the valley, but first I must extract from you a promise."

"What is it?" asked Ted.

"You must promise to use every endeavor to get together a company of brave and honest men. These you must guide back to the gulch to the place where I will take you. I will meet you when you return. I want you and the men you bring to be prepared to drive the outlaws from my home."

"You can rely upon us to promise you that much," answered Ted, "for that was really the purpose that brought me into this country—to break up this band of outlaws."

Then for the first time Ted introduced himself to the madman, who now appeared quite rational, and told him of his band of rough riders, whom he believed he would have little difficulty in finding, when once out of the mansion and the mountain.

As Ted told his story John Fullerton's eyes danced with joy. His features softened and his countenance was animated. For the first time, perhaps in many weeks, the man saw a hope of once more getting undisputed possession of the grand mansion he had worked so hard to build.

He had been alone when the outlaws had found the house. Recognizing them as strangers he had hidden from them in his secret passages, and had not dared to show himself. His deluded mind had not suggested to him the plan of leaving the house and going, himself, in search of aid to drive the bandits away.

Now the insane man rejoiced, for he thought that once free, Ted Strong and the other young man, whom he had refused to acknowledge as his son, would soon bring a company of brave men to his aid.

When Ted had finished his assuring remarks, John Fullerton turned and started through a door at the opposite end of the room from which they had entered, uttering a single word—"Come."

A few yards along the passage they had now entered they came to a long, steep stairway, leading into the solid rocks below.

At the foot of the stairway their leader lighted a fresh candle, and the boys found themselves in a sort of cave, the walls and ceiling of which were formed of solid rock.

They could see that that portion of the cave in which they were standing had been blasted and worked out by hand but, after proceeding some distance, Ted noticed that the cave was a natural one.

Whoever had started constructing the passage had, accidentally or otherwise, run into the natural cave and had been saved considerable work, no doubt.

The passage was now so roomy that the three men easily traveled along side by side except at intervals, when the passage narrowed for severals yards or rods.

They traveled along this passage for about three-quarters of an hour before John Fullerton called a halt.

"We are near the end of our journey," he said, "and I will leave you now and return. Don't forget to come back soon. I will spend most of my time at the end of

this passage to guide you back to the mansion." He then gave them directions for finding their way into the gulch.

As John Fullerton disappeared back along the passage the boys pressed on toward the direction they had been instructed to go.

Twenty minutes later they had reached what was evidently the end of the passage, for nothing was before them apparently but solid rock.

"Let's see," said Ted, "your father said to press against a white stone to the left, didn't he?"

"Yes, and here it is," was Frank's answer.

As Ted pressed against the stone Frank had designated, a large section of what appeared to be solid rock creaked and then, when gently pushed, it swung outward.

As the young men rushed out into the welcome sunlight of the big gulch they were greatly astonished at the sight that met their eyes.

Right before them, less that five rods away, gathered in a bunch, were the members of Ted's band of young rough riders!

"Waal, I'll be durned!" was the exclamation of Bud Morgan, who was the first to speak, as he quickly dismounted and rushed toward the young rough rider.

Ben Tremont, Bob Martin, Kit Summers and Leo Morrissey were not less demonstrative in their remarks of astonishment.

After shaking hands all around, Ted introduced the young Englishman to the members of his party.

Of course the young rough riders were curious to know of all that had happened to their young leader since he had left, and Ted spent the next hour in informing them of all that had taken place and the discoveries he had made, also telling them the young Englishman's story.

---

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE LIGHT OF REASON.

While Ted had been telling his friends of what had taken place in the mysterious mansion in the mountains, Kit Summers and Bud Morgan had been building a fire and preparing a dinner.

After the meal was finished Ted remarked:

"I think we had better get to work right away in penetrating to the bandits' stronghold. While John Fullerton will hardly expect us back so soon, and will probably not be found in the passage, I am sure I can find the way back without his assistance. We may meet him on the way.

Following Ted's directions the horses were led into the cave and all the supplies, not to be carried by the men, were also taken into the passage. The outlaw prisoner was also taken inside and secured.

Just inside the mountain the horses were secured, and then the big rock was drawn back to its original position covering the hole in the mountain side.

Then the rough riders, together with Morrissey and the Englishman, followed their young leader along the rocky passage into the mountain.

They had not proceeded far past the place where Ted and Frank had a couple of hours before parted with John Fullerton, when Ted uttered an exclamation and darted swiftly ahead, several yards, and then dropped to his knees over some dark object.

As his companions came up they found Ted bending over a dead or unconscious human being.

As Frank drew near Ted looked up at the young man.

He readily interpreted the questioning look upon the young Englishman's face.

"Yes, Frank," said Ted, "it is your father, but he is not dead—only unconscious. I do not think that his injury will prove fatal."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Frank.

"Boys," said Ted, turning to the rest of his companions, "this man has been quite badly injured. He must have been unconscious almost ever since parting with Frank and I. We must get him out of here. Some of you help me lift him."

Tender hands gathered up the inanimate form of Frank's insane father and carried him slowly, but gently, back along the passage in the direction from which they had come.

Reaching the open air Ted directed that a tent be erected and, as soon as that had been done, the unconscious form was carried therein and laid upon a pile of folded blankets.

Ted then examined his patient.

He found a large swelling upon the side of the man's head, directly over one ear.

But there was no abrasion of the scalp.

The insane man, in passing along the rocky passage, had stumbled and fallen, striking his head either upon some jutting rock or upon the floor.

Ted always had a small case of medicines in his saddlebags and he knew considerable of how to apply them.

He first, however, forced some brandy down his patient's throat and then, procuring a bottle of some brown-

ish fluid, began bathing the lump upon John Fullerton's head.

It was an hour before the man showed signs of returning consciousness and half as long a time elapsed from then on, before John Fullerton opened his eyes.

As he opened his eyes his orbs rolled wildly, and he gazed upon the men who had gathered around to watch the progress of Ted's treatments.

"Demons!" he yelled. "Are you still pursuing me? Begone!"

He made an effort to sit up, but he was still too weak and fell back with a groan. Then he fainted dead away.

Ted ordered that every man of the party should then leave the tent except himself and Frank.

The afternoon had been nearly spent when, for the second time, Ted succeeded in bringing the injured man back to consciousness.

John Fullerton's eyes seemed dull and heavy when he opened them the second time. He glanced at Ted and at Frank, but made no remark.

He uttered but one sentence and that was in a different tone than Ted had yet heard the man use. It was in a voice so different from what the man had before spoken in that Ted was surprised, and he noticed that Frank stirred quickly and bent eagerly forward to look more clearly upon his father's face.

The man had merely said: "Tell Hobbs not to serve my breakfast until ten."

Then he had rolled over slightly and in a few moments the boys heard him breathing regularly and naturally.

They knew that he was sleeping a refreshing sleep.

As Ted glided quietly out of the tent Frank followed him.

Outside Ted asked Frank if he had any idea what caused his father to make such a strange remark, regarding serving a breakfast at ten o'clock.

"Hobbs was the name of an old servant of our family, in London," replied Frank. "Father must have thought he was at home. When he was unusually tired, on retiring, he often ordered that Hobbs should not serve his breakfast until late the following morning. He always took his breakfast in his sleeping room, and his usual hour was eight o'clock."

"That explains it," said Ted. "Your father had an idea he was about to retire in his own room in his home in London. Now, Frank, I do not want to raise any false hopes in your mind, but I believe that when your father awakes he may be rational. I have heard of such bumps on the cranium, such as your father received, having restored crazy or insane people to their right mind. Your father may awaken quite sane. Now I want to give you a little advice. It may be worth following."

"What is it?" asked Frank. "God knows I am willing to do anything you suggest, that is in my power, that would seem to aid my father."

"Suppose you shave off that mustache. That might change your looks—make you resemble yourself as you were when your father last saw you. I am in hopes that he will recognize you when his present sleep is over."

"Have you a razor?" asked Frank.

"Yes," was the reply, and Ted soon brought one from his saddlebags.

Bending over a pool of clear water, in lieu of a mirror, Frank was soon engaged in sacrificing his fine, brown mustache.

Ten minutes later he presented himself to Ted, looking at least ten years younger.

"If father has a spark of memory for the old home left," remarked Frank, "I do not think he can fail to recognize me now."

For hours John Fullerton continued to sleep. It had grown dark and the rough riders had decided to go into camp for the night, giving up the idea of penetrating the passage to the mansion until the following morning.

Ted and Frank slept very little that night, for one or the other was continually at the side of the latter's father.

There was no interruption to the injured man's nap, and his breathing continued regular all night. Early in the evening he seemed to have a slight fever, but that gradually passed away.

It was long past daylight, and both Ted and Frank were near the sleeping man, when John Fullerton made the first move, showing that he was about to open his eyes.

His awakening was natural. He rubbed his eyes several moments before opening them widely, and then suddenly threw back the covering and sat up.

Astonishment was written on every line of his haggard face, but from his eyes gleamed the light of restored reason!

He was mad no longer!

With a glad cry Frank sprang toward his father.

John Fullerton's eyes were gazing directly into those of his son and, as the young man stood up, the father asked:

"Frank, what is the matter? Have I been sick? Where are we?"

## CHAPTER XII.

### AGAIN IN THE MANSION.

John Fullerton did not greet his son effusively.

He treated the lad more as if they had been separated since the previous day instead of for eight long years.

In fact John Fullerton's mind contained no recollection of what had happened during the years since he had left home. Neither did he have any recollections of having left home.

It took several hours for Frank to tell his father what had happened, together with what details he had gathered of his parent's movements in America.

Fullerton had no recollection of the mansion in the mountains which he had built, no recollection of his title deeds, no remembrance of having been frightened from his home by the outlaws.

All was a blank, and the story his son told him seemed like a fairy tale—nevertheless, he was bound to accept it as the truth.

Food was brought to him and he ate heartily and listened with interest to what the young men had to tell him concerning their discovery of him in the mountain castle.

Except for the loss of memory of the years which he was insane, John Fullerton seemed to have recovered entirely from his mental ailment.

He rapidly gathered strength, too. The hearty breakfast seemed to do him much good, and while the lump upon his head still pained him, he announced himself as ready to accompany the young rough rider's party through the passage in the mountain to the mansion home of the bandit chief, whenever Ted Strong wished to start.

Right after dinner was the time appointed by Ted for making the second start toward the mansion, for the purpose of capturing the bandits, and preparations were made as before for the trip.

Of course John Fullerton was now of no use as a guide, for he had forgotten all about the secret passages, but Ted and Frank both had a fair conception of the route that had been taken by them in leaving the big stone house, and anticipated little difficulty in finding the way back to the room in which the portrait hung.

When the young rough rider and his companions reached the room in which John Fullerton had spent his sleeping hours since the bandits had taken possession of the house, Ted called a halt to talk over plans for overcoming the outlaws and regaining possession of the house.

Although Ted and Frank knew the way to the room in the front of the mansion, from which they had first entered the passage, they thought it advisable to explore some of the other passages before making a decided move against the outlaws.

It was known that the company, under the leadership of Frank Casse, outnumbered Ted's party at least five to one, and the boys realized that it would be necessary to proceed cautiously, and with some well-defined plan, in order to conquer their foes. A bold, open attack would almost be certain to result disastrously for them.

To save time Ted finally decided to divide his party into twos, each couple to explore some one passage, and then return to the room they were then in, before making an attack. Each couple could then report what they had discovered and a plan of procedure could then be made based on the reports.

Proceeding along the passage toward the room in which the portrait was hung, Ted divided his men, sending two into every cross passage they came to.

Kit Summers and Bob Martin were the first two to leave the main party, and the next passage was assigned to Ben Tremont and John Fullerton, while the third was given to Bud Morgan and Frank Fullerton.

Ted and Morrissey then turned into the next passage, which led toward the center of the mansion.

The passage taken by Kit Summers and Bob Martin was a short one, and had but three corners. There were no branch passages and the two young rough riders soon came to the end of their trip.

They found themselves facing the bare wall, beyond which they could plainly hear sounds of tinware being handled, and the crackling of a fire.

A ray of light found its way into the passage through a small crack in the wall.

Applying his eye to the crack Kit found he could see almost every corner of the big room beyond.

It was a kitchen, and he saw three men at work, wearing aprons, engaged in cooking, washing dishes and other kitchen work.

They made no attempt to open the panel, which disguised the entrance to the secret passage in which they were crouching, but within a few minutes turned and made their way back to the room where they were to report to Ted Strong.

Ben Tremont and John Fullerton found that their passage was long and winding, and that three branch pas-

sages led off from it. The main passage led to the dining room, which they found to be deserted, while the branch passages led respectively to the bedroom which had been occupied by Ted and Frank, the one night they had spent in the house, and to two other similar bedrooms. In none of these rooms did the explorers find any human beings and they, too, returned to the room where they were to join the rest of their company.

Bud Morgan and Frank Fullerton had gone but a few yards along the passage they had been assigned to explore when they came to a cross passage, leading off in two directions. This passage, in the direction to the left, they decided to explore first, and accordingly turned into it.

They had proceeded carefully along for five minutes, and had turned several corners, when Bud, who was in the lead, suddenly halted.

He had heard a slight noise, which he thought probably came from some room bordering the passage on the right.

Moving cautiously along, he ran his hand along the side of the wall of the passage on that side, and his fingers came in contact with the head of what appeared to be a large, brass screw.

Close to the screw there was a hole in the wall, such as might have been caused by a nail driven through the wood and then removed.

Morgan glued his eye to the hole and a strange sight met his view.

He was looking directly into what appeared to be the private office of the bandit chief.

A small iron safe occupied one corner of the room; several chairs were scattered about, and at one side was a large desk.

At the desk was seated a man, occupied in addressing a large pile of envelopes. Bud recognized the man as Frank Casse, the leader of the outlaws, by the description given of him by Ted.

Directly at Casse's elbow, on the desk, was a great pile of money, mostly in bank notes. Near the bills were stacked three piles of gold coins and four piles of silver dollars.

As fast as the bandit chief addressed an envelope he counted out a sum of money from the piles near at hand, placed it in the envelope, sealed the same and laid it to one side.

After noting these points Morgan moved to one side to give Frank an opportunity to look into the room.

"Is that man the leader of the bandits?" asked Bud, when Frank had been looking through the small hole for several minutes.

"Yes, that is Frank Casse," replied Frank.

Just at that minute Frank raised his hand to brace himself, and inadvertently placed his palm against the brass screw.

As he did so a section of the wall was released and suddenly slid back, exposing the secret passage.

As the panel flew back Frank lost his balance and fell headlong into the room occupied by the bandit chief!

Casse had not heard the sound of the moving panel, but he heard the noise made by Frank's fall, and before the young man could regain his feet the bandit was facing him.

Casse had no revolver, but he held an ugly knife in his hand, and as he started toward the young Englishman, the latter retreated into the corner of the room.

The bandit followed, evidently intent upon killing the lad, if possible. Casse, with a cruel gleam in his eyes, approached the young man who had crowded into the corner and was about to plunge the knife into the lad's throat when his intention was frustrated by a command from Bud Morgan.

Morgan was now in the room and he had the bandit covered with his revolver.

"None of that, my man," Morgan yelled. "The moment that knife touches ther boy's skin yer will die!"

Casse halted and looked around. He did not seem startled as he saw that a stranger had him covered. The bandit was truly a man of great nerve.

"You dare not shoot," he sneered, "for a shot at me would be fatal to your friend. My knife would pierce his throat the second that you pulled the trigger!"

---

## CHAPTER XIII.

### TED TAKES A HAND.

Ted Strong and Leo Morrissey proceeded along the passage they had entered and, after turning two corners, found themselves at the foot of a stairway leading to the second story.

Mounting the stairs, Ted, who was in the lead, soon found that the passage led to the haunted chambers in which he had first seen the older Fullerton.

With some difficulty Ted found the secret spring that opened the panel leading into the small, closet-like room,

and, as he had every reason to believe that the second-story rooms were not occupied, he resolved to leave the passage and make some explorations.

Going through the two rooms he advanced into the hall, followed closely by Morrissey, and began an investigation of every room on the floor. For half an hour the two young men were busily engaged in opening and shutting doors, examining room after room, all of which they found to be entirely empty, devoid of furnishings and, in most instances, not completed.

They had reached the further end of the mansion, and were about to turn back, when Ted noticed in the corner of the last room visited, a sawed-out square in the floor.

In the center of the square was an iron ring, held in place by a large staple.

As Ted stooped to grasp the ring the young men heard the sound of a crash directly below them.

This was the sound made by Frank as he fell into the room occupied by the bandit chief.

Ted gave a tug at the ring in the trapdoor, and found that it lifted easily and noiselessly.

Down on his knees went the young rough rider, and his face was thrust close to the opening made by the removal of the trapdoor.

He was directly above the corner of the room into which Frank had retreated, and he saw the approach of Casse, and the dangerous gleam of the knife in the outlaw's hand.

Ted involuntarily reached for his revolver, and had it leveled upon the outlaw, when he heard the rough command of Bud Morgan and the bandit's sneering remark.

The outlaw's knife was within an inch of the shrinking young Englishman's throat!

Ted realized that a shot would be hazardous to the safety of Frank Fullerton, for, even should he shoot the villain dead, his body in falling might drive the knife into the Englishman's throat.

The fertile, resourceful brain of the young rough rider almost instantly conceived of a plan for thwarting the purpose of the outlaw king—for disarming the man.

He drew from his pocket a small, but stout cord—one that would easily reach to the floor below.

Casse had not heard any noise over his head, and he did not dream that enemies were looking down on him from the ceiling. The bandit's attention was fully occupied in watching Bud Morgan and the young Englishman.

As Bud stood with extended weapon, still covering the outlaw, he was surprised to see a slender cord descending from the ceiling.

The end of the cord had been tied into a small slipnoose.

Bud's quick wits prevented him from letting his eyes rest upon the cord for more than an instant. He knew that a steady gaze would draw the outlaw's attention to what was taking place.

But in the one, quick glance Morgan had seen the face of his young leader and knew that Ted had taken a hand in the game. Bud could not at first grasp what Ted's intention might be, but awaited to see results, prepared to move, himself, when the right time should come.

Lower and lower descended the slipnoose until it at last dangled right between the outlaw and the young Englishman.

Then for several seconds Ted was busy manipulating his end of the string. Finally, however, he saw that he was going to be successful in his purpose.

The noose slipped directly over the blade of the villain's knife and Ted worked it along until the noose was around the handle of the wicked weapon.

Suddenly with a quick jerk the noose was drawn tight and the weapon was jerked from the bandit's hand and hung far above his head at the end of Ted's string.

Thus suddenly deprived of his weapon, Casse gave one wild look above his head and jumped to the door of the room, opened it and fled into the hall beyond.

His movement had been so quick that Bud Morgan was rattled. He stood with his loaded revolver like a dummy while the bandit was getting away.

"After him!" shouted Ted.

This aroused Bud and he dashed into the hall after Casse, and came in sight of his man just as the latter was heading toward an open door, at the rear of the hall. Frank followed Bud Morgan and came up to him just as Casse had slammed the door in Bud's face and had turned a key in the lock.

"He has escaped," exclaimed Bud, "and all on account of my durned foolishness."

"No," said Frank, "he cannot have escaped if he went into that room, for there is no other way than this door from that room; that is, there is no other way except by a secret passage, perhaps, and the outlaw probably has no knowledge of that."

"How do yer know thet?" asked Bud, doubtingly.

"Because that is the room in which Ted Strong and

myself were locked during the one night we spent under this roof."

At this moment Ted Strong and Leo Morrissey arrived on the spot and Ted expressed relief when he found that the bandit chief had entered the large bedroom with the barred windows.

"We have made a start now," said Ted, and we must move quickly from now on until we get all the outlaws in our power. Morrissey, I will detail you to stand in this passage near this door and guard the bandit chief. If necessary shoot him should he try to get out of the room."

"All right, sir," returned Leo.

"Now, Frank," continued Ted, "I will ask you to return to the room where the rest of our party are to meet; tell them of the situation in this part of the house and guide them back to the room where you found the bandit chief counting the money."

Frank started immediately upon his errand.

Ted and Bud Morgan then returned to the office of the bandit leader for the purpose of securing the money, which they had no doubt was the plunder taken by the outlaws from the Miners' Bank of Gallego.

This was proved upon examining the bills, for many of them were still wrapped in their original packages with bands about them, upon which was printed the name of that bank.

Ted did not stop to count the money, but began examining the envelopes into which the outlaw had been placing certain sums. Opening several of the envelopes which were addressed to different individuals, Ted saw that each contained the same amount of money.

"Bud," said Ted, finally, "Casse was engaged in preparing to divide this money, or a part of it, among his men, when you disturbed him."

"Gol durn my skin, if I don't believe you have struck it right," returned Bud.

"He probably intended paying them off to-night."

"Yes."

"Well," remarked Ted, with a smile, "there will be no pay day to-day. The ghost will not walk to-night, eh?"

"Nary a stroll," returned Bud.

The two men quickly gathered up the money and placed it snugly away in the small safe, the door of which had no combination and was made to lock merely with a large key.

The key was found in the lock and, after throwing the heavy bolt, Ted put the key carefully away in his pocket.

Just then Frank appeared in the entrance to the secret passage, stepped down into the room and was followed by Kit Summers, John Fullerton, Bob Martin and Ben Tremont.

With the exception of Morrissey, who was guarding the door of the room in which Casse had escaped, Ted's party was now gathered together in the one room.

Ted first heard the report of the other members of his company, regarding what they had learned during their investigations, before advancing any plan of procedure against the bandits.

When they had finished Ted opened his mouth to speak, but quickly closed it again.

There had come a rap upon the door!

There was a perfect silence in the room for a moment and then the knock was repeated, this time a trifle louder.

Tiptoeing lightly to the door, his revolver in one hand, Ted placed the other upon the knob and suddenly threw the door wide open.

What met the view of Ted and his companions was the figure of a much-astonished colored man. He was the same who had acted in the capacity of waiter when Ted and Frank had eaten in the dining room of the mansion.

The darky had evidently expected his master to answer his knock and, when he found himself face to face with strangers, his eyes grew large and rolled wildly in his head in alarm.

He turned as pale as a person of his color could. His teeth chattered like hail falling on a slate roof, as he endeavored to say something.

Then he fell on his knees with hands extended toward Ted as if in supplication.

Ted, amused, watched the darky's actions for a minute and then he told the man to get up and enter the room.

Bidding the colored man to take a seat Ted stood before him, looking him straight in the eye.

"Now I am going to ask you a few questions," said Ted, "and I want you to answer every one of them to the best of your ability. Don't tell any lies. Do you see this revolver?"

Ted advanced and placed the cold barrel of his weapon against the scared darky's forehead.

"Lor', massa! Yah, I see 'em! Lor', don't shoot! Black Joe, he ain't done nothing; deed he ain't!"

"Your master is already in our power, and you will die if I catch you telling any lies," continued Ted. "How long have you been in this house?"

With lips trembling with fear the darky made several attempts to answer before he finally managed to stammer:

"Les' a leetle time, massa—les' a leetle time. De big massa of dis place fotched me here again' my will, massa."

"Brought you here against your will?" questioned Ted.

After much questioning and prompting Ted gathered from the darky that he had met Casse on the streets of Los Angeles five or six weeks before, and that he had hired out to the bandit chief as a body servant, not knowing that the man was an outlaw.

Blindfolded, he had been brought into the mansion and, knowing no way of escape, he had since lived almost every minute in fear of his life, serving the bandit chief because he dared not do otherwise.

Ted believed every word of the colored man's story, and then he pitied the scared negro.

In a few moments he had assured the black man that no harm would come to him, and that if he would tell what he knew about the location of rooms in certain parts of the building, and lead Ted and his men to them, he would soon be free to return to Los Angeles if he wished.

The darky, assured that he was now in the hands of friends, readily agreed to do all in his power to aid Ted's company to capture the bandits.

---

## CHAPTER XIV.

### TED'S INGENIOUS MAN TRAP.

Continuing to question the black man Ted learned that the darky was acquainted with the position of every room on the ground floor. He said that the wife of the outlaw and several women prisoners occupied rooms in a large wing at the right of the mansion, approaching it from the front, while most of the bandits occupied rooms in a wing on the opposite side of the building. The rooms bordering the center hall, in one of which the young rough riders were now gathered, were used for the outlaw chief's special purposes.

Ted also learned that the darky had knocked upon his master's door at that particular time because of being previously ordered to do so. The master had decided to divide the plunder that day and the darky had been delegated to bring the outlaws to their chief's office, one or two at a time, to receive their envelopes.

This information put an ingenious plan into Ted's mind.

"Is this money to be distributed to every man in the house?" asked Ted.

"Yes, massa," answered the darky.

"Boys," said Ted, turning to his companions, "I have a plan for capturing these bandits easily and without shooting them down. We will let Black Joe here bring them to the office, one or two at a time, and we will disarm and bind them as they arrive."

"Whoope!" exclaimed Bud Morgan. "Yer always unloads ther groceries jest when they're needed, Ted."

"I think it will be easy to carry out the plan," said Ted, "for the reason the men are probably expecting to be summoned here in that manner this evening to get their shares of the seventy thousand dollars taken from the Gallego bank."

"A regular man trap," commented Kit Summers.

"You are a very remarkable young man, Mr. Strong," said John Fullerton.

"As my eminent friend, Mr. Shakespeare, often remarked, when speaking of me, 'You are as proper a man as anyone shall see in a summer's day,'" put in Bob Martin

"This is evening now, so that quotation won't apply," remarked Ben Tremont.

"Yes, it will," suddenly returned Bob, an amused gleam in his eye, "for that quotation is taken from 'Midsummer Night's Dream.'"

"Then your statement that Ted is 'a proper man' was only a dream?" jokingly asked Kit Summers.

"Oh, you fellows make me tired!" returned Bob.

"Or, as your friend Skateshear would say: 'You grow a-weary——'"

"Here, here," said Ted, laughing, "cut out that nonsense or we will never get anything accomplished. Reserve your jokes until we get the best of these bandits."

"As Shakespeare would s——" began Bob Martin, but his eyes met Ted's. His companions never learned just what the great poet would have been apt to have remarked in that particular emergency.

Ted turned to the darky: "You heard me speak about my plan. Do you understand what we wish to do?"

"You jes' bet I do," replied Black Joe, the whites of his eyes becoming prominent in his excitement.

"Can we trust you to carry out your part of the work?" was the next question.

"'Deed yo' can, massa," was the reply.

"All right, then," said Ted, "you had better start at once. Do you know how many there are of the bandits?"

"Not 'zactly," replied the darky, "but I reckon there be 'bout forty of 'em."

"Well, hurry up and bring them along, one at a time. Merely tell them to report at the office and don't send them closer than two minutes apart."

"I'll go strictly by my ol' watch," replied Black Joe, hauling a heavy, ancient-patterened timepiece from his pocket, as he stepped into the hall and started on his errand.

After the darky had departed Ted, in a few words, told his men what he wished them to do, when each of the bandits showed up, and apportioned to each his duties.

Bud Morgan, Kit Summers and Bob Martin produced from their pockets a number of long buckskin thongs, such as most Western men, cowboys and scouts, carry with them at all times for emergencies.

These thongs young Fullerton and his father set to work to cut into strips, the right length for tying up the limbs of the men they expected to soon have in their power.

Nearly ten minutes elapsed before there came a knock at the door.

Ted was standing near the door with one hand upon the knob. Almost at the same instant that the knock came the young rough rider threw the door open, and with lightning quickness his hand shot out and grabbed the outlaw who had knocked by the neckband of his shirt.

Before the astonished bandit could recover from his surprise, or make any resistance, he had been jerked into the room and the door had been shut.

Ted, with a quick twist, whirled the man around; Ben Tremont and Bob Martin soon had the outlaw bound and gagged and lying in the further corner of the room.

The man had hardly been disposed of when there came a second knock.

The darky was carrying out his orders to the complete satisfaction of the young rough rider.

Man after man knocked at the door only to be jerked off his feet into the room, and securely bound.

Ted's man trap was a complete success, and it began to look as if every member of the outlaw band would be captured alive without any bloodshed.

At last there was quite an interval after the arrival of the last man. The darky was probably engaged in locating the last few of the band.

"How many are already bound?" asked Ted of Kit Summers, who was attending to the disposal of the men as fast as they were bound.

"Thirty-eight," was the reply.

"There can be but a few more," said Ted.

Just as he spoke there was a rush of feet along the hallway and the door suddenly flew open.

Black Joe rushed into the room and his face showed great excitement.

"Good Lor', boss," he exclaimed, addressing himself to Ted, "yo' sure must hurry. The young gemmen who was guarding Massa Casse have been knocked down and the boss outlaw have escaped!"

"How many more of the outlaws are there?" asked Ted, preparing to rush into the hall.

"Yo' sure have 'em all here 'ceptin' Massa Casse's wife," returned the darky.

"Bud, you come with me," shouted Ted, as he rushed down the hall to where he expected to find the unconscious form of Leo Morrissey, lying upon the floor.

He reached Morrissey just as the young man was returning to consciousness.

Leo was dazed at first, but in a moment he was able to explain what had taken place.

"It was a woman who felled me!" were his first words.

"A woman?" repeated Ted.

"Yes," said Leo, "I heard the outlaw working his key in the lock of the door and expected that he was about to open it. I drew my revolver and held it up for instant use, keeping my eyes fixed on the door. Suddenly I heard the swishing of skirts in the hall behind me, and turning, I saw a woman standing behind me with a rifle in her hands. She had the gun grasped by the barrel and the stock was raised right over my head. It was too late for me to get away or turn around. The next thing I knew I saw you standing over me."

"Who could the woman have been?" asked Ted, as if to himself.

"She might hev ben ther bandit's wife," said Bud Morgan.

"Yes," returned Ted, "you are probably right."

Leo was now standing up and, although a trifle dizzy, he followed Ted and Bud back to the room in which the outlaws were bound.

"Now," said Ted, "I want you, Bud, together with Kit and Bob, to make a thorough search of the house and try and locate Frank Casse. Capture him alive, if possible, and his wife also, but do not let the man escape if you catch sight of him, even if you have to shoot him down."

The three started out immediately.

John Fullerton and his son and Leo were left to guard the bound prisoners and then Ted spoke to the darky: "Black Joe," he said, "I want you now to take me to the room in which the girls are imprisoned."

The darky conducted Ted up and down several long halls, and into the right wing of the mansion. Along another hall he led the way and finally stopped before a door at the right of the passage.

"They is in here," said Black Joe.

"The door is locked," said Frank, trying the knob. "Do you know where there are any keys that will fit the lock?"

"Not 'less they be some in the missus' room."

"Go and make a search for them," directed Ted.

As the darky moved away to do his bidding Ted knocked several times loudly upon the door. At last he heard a voice within the room:

"Who is it? What is wanted?"

"Are you one of the women prisoners in this house?" asked Ted.

"Yes; there are two of us," came the answer.

"Can you open the door?"

"No; it is locked from the outside," replied a girlish voice.

"I am Ted Strong, captain of the Young Rough Riders," said Ted, to allay any fears the girls might have. "We have overcome the bandits, have gained possession of this house and will liberate you very soon. You had better dress as quickly as possible."

In a short time Black Joe returned, bringing in his hand a large brass ring on which were strung a number of large keys.

"These is all I could fin'," he explained to Ted, handing the young rough rider the ring.

Ted found that the second key he tried would unlock the door, and, asking the girls if they were ready to come out and receiving an affirmative reply, he opened the door.

The girls had dressed quickly and now stepped out in the hall.

"How can we thank you enough?" began one of them, but Ted did not care to be burdened with their words of gratitude.

"Please don't mention it," he said. "You will please me better by forgetting any service we have rendered you as soon as possible."

The girls were both very pretty young women, and although their faces were now pale, and a trifle haggard, and their eyes swollen by much weeping, Ted noted that they were undoubtedly very beautiful when at home, under natural conditions and appropriately dressed. He learned that they were daughters of prominent and wealthy men in Gallego.

The girls were conducted to the other part of the mansion, where Ted had left Morrissey and the two Fullertons guarding the outlaw prisoners.

Then Ted was about to start out to assist Bud Morgan and the other two rough riders in the search for the bandit chief.

He had hardly reached the hall, however, when he found Bud and his companions returning.

"Ther bandit chief must hev left ther house," said Morgan, "fer we ain't been able ter find no track of him."

"Well, we'll move these prisoners to the front of the house," said Ted, "and then we'll look again."

The bound outlaws were then taken from the room in which they had been trapped and were secured in the large hall at the front of the mansion.

The young women were given the use of the large, paneled room to the right of the hall, in which was hanging the painted portrait.

Ted was then about to propose that several of his men assist in bringing the bandit's safe from the office to the front of the house, where it would be handy to guard, when the company was suddenly startled by the sound of a terrible explosion!

The walls of the mansion trembled and the ceiling seemed about to fall upon them!

## CHAPTER XV.

### CONCLUSION.

At the moment of the explosion it certainly seemed that the whole mansion was about to tumble about the heads of the young rough riders, their friends and their prisoners.

The explosion was followed by the terrible sound of crashing timbers, falling stones and a part of the big mansion was surely falling to the ground.

The crashing continued for several minutes, but the front of the house, most providentially, remained standing.

There were great cracks in the ceiling, however, and in the walls, and Ted deemed it so unsafe that all members of the company retired to the open air, taking the prisoners with them.

Then Ted, Bud Morgan and Kit Summers began an

investigation of the damage and the cause of the explosion.

Just before they started Ted noticed one of the prisoners beckoning a request to have the gag taken from his mouth. This was done.

"Me know about explosion," exclaimed the man, when he could talk.

"Well?" encouraged Ted.

"The chief he have dynamite mine put under part of house. He say if he is ever attacked he will blow up mansion."

"Ah! That explains it," said Ted. "The explosion was Frank Casse's work. He wanted revenge and expected to kill us all, his own men included. But he got left."

Now that there was no longer need for silence, Ted gave instructions that all the gags be removed from the mouths of the prisoners and then he started with Bud and Kit on the tour of inspection.

The great castle was found to be almost a complete wreck, and, of course, would probably never be rebuilt. In one moment the work of several years and the expenditure of a large sum of money had been ruined.

The three rough riders examined that part of the ruins where the bandit's office had once been, and were rejoiced to find that it would not be difficult to recover the safe containing the money taken from the Miners' Bank of Gallego.

Then they continued further along the ruins. Ted uttered an exclamation a moment later.

They found that the explosion had uncovered the mouth of what appeared to be the shaft of a mine!

Further investigations were postponed until daylight.

In the morning the first work accomplished was the recovery of the iron safe and then Ted, Kit, Bud and the two Fullertons visited the mine shaft.

They descended the shaft and found that, although the mine had been little worked, it was rich in ore. The mine was the property of John Fullerton, and the legal papers in his pocket proved that his title was clear.

It may be stated here that the mine later proved to be one of the richest in California and made John Fullerton a multi-millionaire.

It is hardly necessary to tell of how the prisoners were conducted back to Gallego, and turned over to the proper authorities, or of the great rejoicing in all of the towns bordering the desert, when the news was spread of the capture of the entire band of outlaws known as the Mojave Terrors, except the leader and his wife.

The name of Ted Strong and the names of his young rough riders were upon every lip.

The fathers of the two girls were extravagant in their expressions of gratitude to Ted and his companions and, learning that the young rough riders would accept no money as a reward for returning the girls safely to their homes, they compromised by giving a grand banquet, in honor of the great work accomplished by the young men.

The banquet was a great event and to it were invited most of the prominent men of that part of California. Learning that the young rough riders were in that part of the country, originally for a pleasure trip, Ted and his friends were overwhelmed with invitations to visit various beautiful homes.

Four days the young rough riders spent in the town of Gallego, and then one morning they took leave of their new friends and started on the horseback journey north as at first planned.

A few days later the boys rode into a small town nearly one hundred miles from Gallego. They went immediately to the only hotel in the town, and as Ted wrote his name upon the register the clerk eyed him a moment and then said:

"Are you Mr. Ted Strong, the leader of the famous Young Rough Riders?"

"Yes."

"Then there is a telegram here for you. It has been here two days." He handed Ted the envelope.

Extracting the telegram, Ted read it quickly over and then, calling the others about him, he read it aloud.

It was signed by Leo Morrissey and was worded as follows:

"Half of the bandits have escaped. They were aided by Frank Casse, who accomplished the feat of breaking into the jail single-handed. Can you help us again?"

Getting a telegraph blank from the clerk, Ted wrote the following words upon it and sent the hotel porter with it to the telegraph office.

"You can depend upon the Young Rough Riders.

"TED STRONG."

THE END.

Next week's issue (53) will contain "The Young Rough Rider Trapped; or, A Villain's Desperate Play." It relates how Frank Casse turned up once more and how Ted and Bud Morgan had a terrible experience in a deserted mine.

# YOUNG ROVER LIBRARY

## *Adventures of THE AMERICAN HARKAWAY*

THE unflagging interest taken in the fortunes of the immortal Jack Harkaway by young boys, and old boys as well, has for thirty years been one of the marvels of the publishing world. These stories seem to be just as eagerly sought after and devoured to-day as when first issued, and myriads of readers **idolize the Bold and Unconquered Jack** in much the same spirit as they do good old Robinson Crusoe. In fact it has become a household name. And yet, there has always been something like a spirit of keen disappointment among American lads because this hero happened to be a Britisher. At last believing the time is ripe to remedy this one defect, we now take pleasure in presenting a new series, in which, from week to week will be chronicled the wonderful adventures and madcap pranks of a genuine Yankee lad, who certainly bids fair to out-Harkaway the famous original of this type. In the energetic and restless Link Rover a unique character has been created, so bold and striking that we confidently expect his name to presently become quite as familiar among our American boys as those of Frank Merriwell or Buffalo Bill. These **Stories of Adventure and Frolic** at school and abroad are written especially for this series by Gale Richards, who is under exclusive contract to devote his whole time and attention to this fascinating work. There is not a dull line from beginning to end, because Link Rover believes it is his especial duty and privilege to keep things constantly "humming." So be fairly warned that to commence reading of his strange experiences is to acquire the "Rover habit," which clings to one like a leech and is very hard to shake off.

***Following is a list of the numbers already issued or in press:***

1—Link Rover, the Scapegrace; or, The Black Sheep of the Family.
2—Link Rover at School Abroad; or, Lively Times at Old Swindon.
3—Link Rover as a Wizard; or, The Yankee Firebrand in an English School.
4—Link Rover's Balloon Voyage; or, Fun and Adventure Among the Clouds.
5—Link Rover Among the Carlists; or, Playing a Bold Game with the Dons.
6—Link Rover Adrift; or, Pranks and Perils on the Mediterranean.
7—Link Rover in Algiers; or, Waking Up a Sleepy Oriental City.
8—Link Rover's Strange Legacy; or, The Audacious Lark at Malta.
9—Link Rover's Chase; or, A Yankee Innocent Along the Nile.
10—Link Rover's Menagerie; or, Lively Times with the Scapegrace.
11—Link Rover, the Wonder-Worker; or, Surprising the Hindoo Jugglers.
12—Link Rover's Jumping Idol; or, Mad Pranks in a Chinese Temple.
13—Link Rover's Pirate Junk; or, The Strange Cruise of the *Howling Ghost.*
14—Link Rover in America; or, In Search of Fun at the "Golden Gate."
15—Link Rover's Wager; or, Mixing Them Up on the Limited.
16—Link Rover Among the Mormons, or, A Madcap Frolic in Old Salt Lake City.
17—Link Rover's Warning; or, The Ghastly Sell on Sheriff Bowie.
18—Link Rover's Glorious Lark; or, Making a Holy Show of the Train Robbers.
19—Link Rover Stranded; or, Finding Fun on the Road.
20—Link Rover's Camp Fires; or, A Jolly Journey with the Hoboes.
21—Link Rover on Guard; or, Tricks Played on Travelers.
22—Link Rover's Discovery; or, A Very Hot Time at Denver.
23—Link Rover Trapped; or, The Bursting of a Bubble.
24—Link Rover and the Money Makers; or, Something Not Down on the Bills.
25—Link Rover in Chicago; or, Making Things Fairly Hum.
26—Link Rover's Strategy; or, Smoking Out an Old Enemy.
27—Link Rover Among the Shanty Boatmen; or, A Roaring Voyage Down the Mississippi.
28—Link Rover's Flying Wedge; or, Football Tactics on a River Steamboat.
29—Link Rover's Crusoe Island; or, A Campaign of Humor in the Flood.
30—Link Rover's Surprise; or, The Mischief to Pay.
31—Link Rover Among the Cotton Pickers; or, Hustling for Fun Down in Dixie Land.
32—Link Rover's Tame Scarecrow; or, The Astounding Racket "Daddy" Played.

**A new number every week. Price, FIVE CENTS, at all newsdealers, or by sending direct to the publishers.**

**STREET & SMITH, 238 William Street, New York**

# YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY

4—Ted Strong's Stratagem; or, Saving a Boy's Honor.
5—Ted Strong's Ride for Life; or, Caught in the Circle.
6—Ted Strong on the Trail; or, The Cattle Men of Salt Licks.
7—Ted Strong in Montana; or, Trouble at the Blackfoot Agency.
8—Ted Strong's Nerve; or, Wild West Sport at Black Mountain.
9—Ted Strong's Rival; or, The Cowboys of Sunset Ranch.
10—Ted Strong's Peril; or, Saved by a Girl.
11—Ted Strong's Gold Mine; or, The Duel at Rocky Ford.
12—Ted Strong's Lawsuit; or, Right Against Might.
13—Ted Strong's Railway Trip; or, An Unsolved Mystery.
14—Ted Strong's Mission; or, Taming a Tenderfoot.
15—Ted Strong's Might; or, The Cross Against the Sword.
16—Ted Strong's Puzzle; or, The Golden Mesa.
17—Ted Strong in the Chaparral; or, The Hunt at Las Animas.
18—Ted Strong's Forethought; or, King of the Mesa.
19—Ted Strong in the Land of Little Rain; or, Bud Morgan's Vengeance.
20—Ted Strong's Water Sign; or, In Shoshone Land.
21—Ted Strong's Steadiness; or, The Cattle Rustlers of Ceriso.
22—Ted Strong's Land Boom; or, The Rush for a Homestead.
23—Ted Strong's Indian Trap; or, Matching Craft with Craft.
24—Ted Strong's Signal; or, Racing with Death.
25—Ted Strong's Stamp Mill; or, The Woman in Black.
26—Ted Strong's Recruit; or, A Hidden Foe.
27—Ted Strong's Discovery; or, The Rival Miners.
28—Ted Strong's Chase; or, The Young Rough Riders on the Trail.
29—Ted Strong's Enemy; or, An Uninvited Guest.
30—Ted Strong's Triumph; or, The End of the Contest.
31—Ted Strong in Nebraska; or, The Trail to Fremont.
32—Ted Strong in Kansas City; or, The Last of the Herd.
33—The Rough Riders in Missouri; or, In the Hands of His Enemy.
34—The Young Rough Riders in St. Louis; or, The League of the Camorra.
35—The Young Rough Riders in Indiana; or, The Vengeance of the Camorra.
36—The Young Rough Riders in Chicago; or, Bud Morgan's Day Off.
37—The Young Rough Riders in Kansas; or, The Trail of the Outlaw.
38—The Young Rough Riders in the Rockies; or, Fighting in Mid Air.
39—The Young Rough Rider's Foray; or, The Mad Horse of Raven Hill.
40—The Young Rough Rider's Fight to the Death; or, The Mad Hermit of Bear's Hole.
41—The Young Rough Rider's Indian Trail; or, Okanaga, the Cheyenne.
42—The Young Rough Rider's Double; or, Unmasking a Sham.
43—The Young Rough Rider's Vendetta; or, The House of the Sorceress.
44—Ted Strong in Old Mexico; or, The Haunted Hacienda.
45—The Young Rough Rider in California; or, The Owls of San Pablo.
46—The Young Rough Rider's Silver Mine; or, The Texas Giant.
47—The Young Rough Rider's Wildest Ride; or, Cleaning Out a Whole Town.
48—The Young Rough Rider's Girl Guide; or, The Maid of the Mountains.
49—The Young Rough Rider's Handicap; or, Fighting the Mormon Kidnapers.
50—The Young Rough Rider's Daring Climb; or, The Treasure of Copper Crag.
51—The Young Rough Rider's Bitterest Foe; or, The Challenge of Capt. Nemo.
52—The Young Rough Rider's Great Play; or, The Mad Ally of a Villain.
53—The Young Rough Rider Trapped; or, A Villain's Desperate Play.

***All of the above numbers always on hand. If you cannot get them from your newsdealer, five cents per copy will bring them to you by mail, postpaid.***

**STREET & SMITH, Publishers, 238 William Street, NEW YORK**

# BRAVE AND BOLD

**Contains the Biggest and Best Stories of All Descriptions.**
**A Different Complete Story Each Week.**

FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF THE LATEST ISSUES:

61—Backed by an Unknown; or, Dick Darrell's Hustle for a Living. By Cornelius Shea.
62—All Aboard; or, Life on the Lake. By Oliver Optic.
63—Phil, the Fiddler; or, The Story of a Young Street Musician. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
64—Dick Halladay's Pranks; or, Fun at Strykerville Academy. By W. L. James, Jr.
65—Slow and Sure; or, From the Street to the Shop. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
66—Little by Little; or, The Cruise of the *Flyaway*. By Oliver Optic.
67—Beyond the Frozen Seas; or, The Land of the Pigmies. By Cornelius Shea.
68—The Young Acrobat; or, The Great North American Circus. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
69—Saved from the Gallows; or, The Rescue of Charlie Armitage. By Matt Royal.
70—Checkmated by a Cadet; or, Conquered by Chance. By Harrie Irving Hancock.
71—Nuggets and Nerve; or, The Two Boy Miners. By Frank Sheridan.
72—Mile-a-Minute Tom; or, The Young Engineer of Pine Valley. By Cornelius Shea.
73—Seared With Iron; or, The Band of Skeleton Bar. By Cornelius Shea.
74—The Deuce and the King of Diamonds; or, Two Southern Boys in South Africa. By the author of "Among the Malays."
75—Now or Never; or, The Adventures of Bobby Bright. By Oliver Optic.
76—Blue-Blooded Ben; or, Two Princeton Pals. By the author of "Hal Larkin."
77—Checkered Trails; or, Under the Palmettoes. By Marline Manley.
78—Figures and Faith; or, Messenger Clinton's Chance. By the author of "The Hero of Ticonderoga."
79—The Trevalyn Bank Puzzle; or, The Face in the Locket. By Matt Royal.
80—The Athlete of Rossville; or, The Isle of Serpents. By Cornelius Shea.
81—Try Again; or, The Trials and Triumphs of Harry West. By Oliver Optic.
82—The Mysteries of Asia; or, Among the Komdafs. By Cornelius Shea.
83—The Frozen Head; or, Puzzling the Police. By Paul Rand.
84—Dick Danforth's Death Charm; or, Lost in the South Seas. By the author of "The Wreck of the *Glaucus*."
85—Burt Allen's Trial; or, Why the Safe was Robbed. By W. A. Parcelle.
86—Prisoners of War; or, Jack Dashaway's Rise from the Ranks. By "Old Tecumseh."
87—A Charmed Life; or, The Boy with the Snake Skin Belt. By the author of "Among the Malays."
88—Only an Irish Boy; or, Andy Burke's Fortunes. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
89—The Key to the Cipher; or, The Boy Actor's Struggle. By Frank J. Earll.
90—Through Thick and Thin; or, Foes to the Last. By Walter J. Newton.
91—In Russia's Power; or, How Two Boys Outwitted the Czar. By Matt Royal.
92—Jonah Mudd, the Mascot of Hoodooville; or, Which Was Which? By Fred Thorpe.
93—Fighting the Seminoles; or, Harry Emerson's Red Friend. By Maj. Herbert H. Clyde.
94—The Young Outlaw; or, Adrift in the Streets. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
95—The Pass of Ghosts; or, A Yankee Boy in the Far West. By Cornelius Shea.
96—The Fortunes of a Foundling; or, Dick, the Outcast. By Ralph Ranger.
97—The Hunt for the Talisman; or, The Fortunes of the Gold Grab Mine. By J. M. Merrill.
98—Mystic Island. The Tale of a Hidden Treasure. By the author of "The Wreck of the *Glaucus*."
99—Capt. Startle; or, The Terror of the Black Range. By Cornelius Shea.
100—Julius, the Street Boy; or, A Waif's Rise from Poverty. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
101—Shanghaied; or, A Wanderer Against His Will. By H. C. Emmet.
102—Luke Jepson's Treachery; or, The Dwarfs of the Pacific. By the author of "The Wreck of the *Glaucus*."
103—Tangled Trails; or, The Mystery of the Manville Fortune. By Clifford Park.
104—James, Langley & Co.; or, The Boy Miners of Salt River. By the author of "Capt. Startle."
105—Ben Barclay's Courage; or, The Fortunes of a Store Boy. By Horatio Alger, Jr.
106—Fred Desmond's Mission; or, The Cruise of the "Explorer." By Cornelius Shea.
107—Tom Pinkney's Fortune; or, Around the World with Nellie Bly. By Lieut. Clyde.
108—Detective Clinket's Investigations; or, The Mystery of the Severed Hand. By Clifford Park.
109—In the Depths of the Dark Continent; or, The Vengeance of Van Vincent. By the author of "The Wreck of the 'Glaucus.'"
110—Barr, the Detective; or, The Peril of Lucy Graves. By Thomas P. Montfort.
111—A Bandit of Costa Rica; or, The Story of a Stranded Circus. By Cornelius Shea.
112—Dacey Dearborn's Difficulties; or, The Struggle of the Rival Detectives. By Clifford Park.
113—Ben Folsom's Courage; or, How Pluck Won Out. By Fred Thorpe.
114—Daring Dick Goodloe's Apprenticeship; or, The Fortunes of a Young Newspaper Reporter. By Phil Willoughby.
115—Bowery Bill, the Wharf Rat; or, The Young Street Arab's Vow. By Ed. S. Wheeler.
116—A Fight for a Sweetheart; or, The Romance of Young Dave Mansard. By Cornelius Shea.
117—Col. Mysteria; or, The Tracking of a Criminal to His Grave. By Launce Poyntz.

***All of the above numbers always on hand. If you cannot get them from your newsdealer, five cents per copy will bring them to you by mail, postpaid.***

**STREET & SMITH, Publishers, 238 William Street, NEW YORK**

# BUFFALO BILL STORIES

**Containing the Most Thrilling Adventures of the Celebrated Government Scout "BUFFALO BILL" (Hon. William F. Cody)**

161—Buffalo Bill's Blockhouse; or, Old Nick Wharton's Strategy.
162—Buffalo Bill's Canyon Cache; or, The Beauty from Butte.
163—Buffalo Bill and the Great Sunstone; or, The Trick that Trapped the Duke of the Dagger.
164—Buffalo Bill's Wildest Ride; or, The Monster Serpent of the Bad Lands' Lake.
165—Buffalo Bill and the Greengoods' Cabal; or, The Woman with the Manacled Arm.
166—Buffalo Bill's Lightning Shot; or, The Red Gulch Rescue.
167—Buffalo Bill's Bandit Friend; or, The Mystery of the Black Riders.
168—Buffalo Bill at Bay; or, The Claim Jumper of Silver Gulch.
169—Buffalo Bill's Dark Drive; or, Manton, the Mountain Mystery.
170—Buffalo Bill's Fair, Square Deal; or, The Duke of the Dagger's Dead Lock.
171—Buffalo Bill's Bold Brigade; or, Injun Joe's Burrow.
172—Buffalo Bill on a Hunt for Gold; or, The Lost Mine of the Cimarrons.
173—Buffalo Bill's Ride for Life; or, Fighting the Border Cattle Thieves.
174—Buffalo Bill's Double; or, The Mephisto of the Prairie.
175—Buffalo Bill and the Claim Jumpers; or, The Mystery of Hellgate Mine.
176—Buffalo Bill's Strategy; or, The Queen of the Crater Cave.
177—Buffalo Bill in Morenci; or, The Cat of the Copper Crag.
178—Buffalo Bill's Dead Drop; or, The Ghost-Scout of Colorado.
179—Buffalo Bill's Texan Hazard; or, The War Trail of the Apaches.
180—Buffalo Bill's Blindfold Duel; or, The Death Feud in Arizona.
181—Buffalo Bill's Mexican Feud; or, The Bandits of Sonora.
182—Buffalo Bill's Still Hunt; or, The Masked Men of Santa Fé.
183—Buffalo Bill's Fiercest Fight; or, The Captive of the Apaches.
184—Buffalo Bill's Navajo Ally; or, The War with the Cave Dwellers.
185—Buffalo Bill's Best Shot; or, Saving Uncle Sam's Troopers.
186—Buffalo Bill's Girl Pard; or, The Mystery of the Blindfold Club.
187—Buffalo Bill's Eagle Eye; or, The Battle of the Staked Plains.
188—Buffalo Bill's Arizona Alliance; or, Navajos Against Apaches.
189—Buffalo Bill's Mexican Adventure; or, The White Indians of Yucatan.
190—Buffalo Bill After the Bandits; or, Chasing the Wyoming Bank Robbers.
191—Buffalo Bill's Red Trailer; or, The Hole-in-the-Wall Outlaws of Wyoming.
192—Buffalo Bill in the Hole-in-the-Wall; or, Fighting the Wyoming Bank Robbers.
193—Buffalo Bill and the Bandit in Armor; or, The Mysterious Horseman of the Mountains.
194—Buffalo Bill and the Masked Mystery; or, The Wild Riders of the Wilderness.
195—Buffalo Bill in the Valley of Death; or, The Masked Brotherhood.
196—Buffalo Bill in the Land of Fire; or, Nick Nomad, the Mountain Wanderer.
197—Buffalo Bill in the Den of Snakes; or, The Search for a Ton of Gold.
198—Buffalo Bill's Nebraskan Quest; or, The Secret Brotherhood of the Platte.
199—Buffalo Bill and the Hounds of the Hills; or, The Traitor Trooper.
200—Buffalo Bill's Young Partner; or, The Outlaw Queen's Cipher Message.
201—Buffalo Bill's Great Search; or, Bagging Bad Birds in Wyoming.
202—Buffalo Bill and the Boy in Blue; or, The Ghost Dancers of the Bad Lands.
203—Buffalo Bill's Long Chase; or, Nervy Frank's Leap for Life.
204—Buffalo Bill's Mine Mystery; or, Conquering the Brotherhood of the Crimson Cross.

***All of the above numbers always on hand. If you cannot get them from your newsdealer, five cents per copy will bring them to you by mail, postpaid.***

**STREET & SMITH, Publishers, 238 William Street, NEW YORK**

# TIP TOP ALBUM

**Containing Water Color Reproductions, together with Character Sketches of the Following Characters:**

FRANK MERRIWELL, DICK MERRIWELL, BRAD BUCKHART, JOE CROWFOOT AND CAP'N WILEY

These reproductions are from water color paintings. They are detachable and can be taken out of the book and framed. The character sketches were written by Mr. Standish himself and give a true outline of each character. Every Tip Top reader should have a set of these pictures, together with a copy of the beautiful album they come in. Will be sent postpaid on receipt of 15 cents.

**STREET & SMITH, 238 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK**

THESE are the first authentic pictures ever published of Frank Merriwell and his friends.

They are suitable for framing. The edition is limited, and you should get your order in soon.

University of South Florida

DIGITAL COMMONS
@ UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Digital Commons @ University of South Florida

Young Rough Riders Weekly

Dime Novel Collections

April 1905

# The young rough rider's great play, or, The mad ally of a villain

Edward C. Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/young_rough_riders

Recommended Citation
Taylor, Edward C., "The young rough rider's great play, or, The mad ally of a villain" (1905). *Young Rough Riders Weekly*. 10.
https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/young_rough_riders/10

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Dime Novel Collections at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Rough Riders Weekly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.